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Garden news

February 27, 2016 £1.99

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JOBS TO DO THIS WEEK!

- ✓ Pot up lily bulbs in containers
- ✓ Coppice cornus
- ✓ Root prune an apple tree



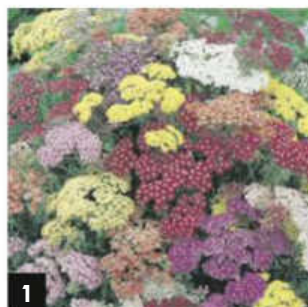
Easy ideas,
**BIG
IMPACT!**

- Create a **striking** alpine display
- Add **fun** with planted woven willow
- Sow **cost-effective** perennials

Carol Klein "My must-have
plants for handsome foliage **NOW!**"



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12. Dwarf Lupin Gallery Mix

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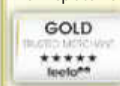
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Peter McDermott
Head Gardener

Peter



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trusted voice in
gardening

P.58

Forced rhubarb:
From plot to plate!



P.12

Creative planting
for a crevice garden

Garden news

I do love a bargain!

Although I've ordered loads of seeds from the commercial seed merchants already, I couldn't resist taking part in my local seed swap.

As always, I took along lots of little envelopes of home-saved seed and paid my £1 entry fee. I then spent the next couple of hours scouring various old shoe boxes for any seeds that caught my eye. My prized haul included artichoke, honesty, pink teasel and, star find, Himalayan blue poppy. Rather than little envelopes, one swapper had made reusable fold-out origami packets - genius. I also had an interesting chat with some of the gardening club members. Where else can you have a good afternoon's entertainment for just a pound, and come home with a bag full of exciting seeds?

Jo-Anne

Garden News Editor

P.33

Prune winter
dogwoods now



P.35

Plant lily bulbs for
bright summer blooms



OUR COVER STAR

Hepatica nobilis is a woodland alpine plant with single flowers in blue and purple, and unusual kidney-shaped leaves.



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Look inside!

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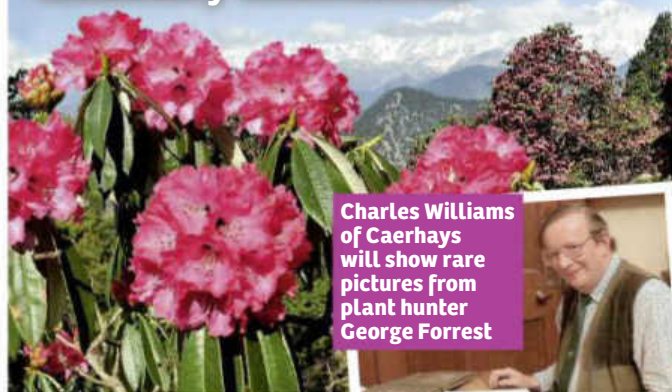
About **NOW**



'Lavender Girl' is vigorous, hardy and wind tolerant

Rhododendron spectacular!

Chelsea to be focus of centenary celebrations



Charles Williams of Caerhays will show rare pictures from plant hunter George Forrest

Rhododendrons from nurseries and gardens around the UK will be staged at Chelsea for a sensational massed display. The collective exhibit will feature plants from Hampshire's Hillier, Cornwall's Burncoose and Southdown, and Millais nurseries from Kent.

The unique venture, the first time this has been undertaken at Chelsea, will celebrate the centenary of the founding of The Rhododendron Society, now the RHS Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group (RCMG). Original members were responsible for helping bring in new species from Asia, via the great plant hunters, and fostering the creation of the first hybrids.

Steering the project is David Millais, Rupert Eley and Charles Williams, all descendants of founding members of the Society

and themselves members of the group and all actively involved in growing rhododendrons.

Talking exclusively to Garden News, David Millais said: "Our display will be our first walk-through exhibit. On one side we'll have big varieties grown in the grand gardens of the time. On the other, we'll have smaller, more modern hybrids to illustrate what has happened in rhododendron breeding over the last 100 years."

The RCMG exhibit will also promote the 100 top rhododendrons voted for by 400 members of the group. Top of the list is compact, mound-forming *R. yakushmanum* from Japan.

One of four plots in the exhibit will promote the species, its varieties, and the many hybrids

PLANTS AT THE SHOW



'Van'

Reliable with a good habit. May-June flowering. Height: 1.5-1.8m (5-6ft) in 10 years.



'Arctic Tern'

Dwarf hybrid. Dainty flowers in May-June. Height: 50-70cm (20-24in) in 10 years.



'Barbarella'

New *R. yakushmanum* hybrid. Height: 50-70cm (20-28in) in 10 years.



Vireya rhododendron

Tender epiphytic species and hybrids. All need cool greenhouse conditions.

bred from them. The next will showcase exciting new hybrids from Exbury gardens in Hampshire, and other diversity of rhododendron species, from large-leaved species such as *R. falconeri* and *R. hodgsonii* to diminutive alpine *R. lepidotum*. Rare, epiphytic (tree-dwelling) Vireya rhododendrons from the cooler mountains of Borneo to the Philippines will be brought by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh.

Charles Williams, owner of Caerhays Castle and Burncoose Nurseries, will be uprooting some mature specimens from the gardens. Said Charles: "We need to start doing this as soon as the ground is dry enough. It's going to be a huge challenge for the team."

Charles will also exhibit photographs and letters from plant hunter George Forrest, who sent seeds of many rhododendrons, magnolias and other plants to Caerhays in the early 20th century.



Cornish castle awarded 'Garden of the Year'

Caerhays Castle and gardens (left) has been awarded the prestigious 2016 Garden of the Year award by the Historic Houses Association.

The 120-acre, Grade II-listed grounds surround the Grade I-listed property dating from 1810. The woodland gardens were largely the creation of J.C. Williams (1862-1939) who helped finance the introduction

of new plants from China (see above), particularly rhododendrons, magnolias, camellias, azaleas and maples. "Caerhays never stands still and is never 'complete', but this is a key moment in the history and development of the plant collections here," said owner Charles Williams. ● Tel: 01872 501310 or visit www.caerhays.co.uk



**Plant
OF THE
WEEK**

Euphorbias

Fresh spring foliage and unusual bracted blooms

Heralding the start of spring's foliage display are vibrant euphorbias, with their spurts of fresh growth. Euphorbia, or spurge, is a large flowering genus of shrubs, perennials, annuals and succulents, with around 2,000 members, from small varieties such as *Euphorbia martinii* 'Tiny Tim' to grand, looming African tree euphorbias, and everything in between - including our Christmas favourite, poinsettia.

But it's the more common, usually evergreen, varieties

available from garden centres that we're used to, such as tall-stemmed *E. characias*, yellow-flowered *E. epithymoides* (formally *polychroma*) and red-tinged *E. amygdaloides*. They're bold and beautiful at this time of year, are easy to look after, and a favourite of any gardener wanting the wow factor with little effort.

Large euphorbias such as *E. mellifera* or *E. characias* can grow to well over a metre tall, billowing through borders if left unchecked. Middling types are great for mid-border colour - pretty

E. palustris has leaves that fade to orange as autumn draws on. Great for containers or nestling at the front of a border are *E. martinii*, which have red 'eyes' at the centre of their yellow-flowering leaf bracts.

Keep them happy

Most euphorbias enjoy a light, dry soil, except *Euphorbia palustris*, which tends to like it moister. Many euphorbias are happy in a bit of shade, but some like *Euphorbia characias* prefer full sun. They're remarkably drought tolerant. Prune back flowering stems down to the soil after blooms have gone, but be careful of the milky sap that exudes from all euphorbias, which will sting eyes and hands.

Four of the best euphorbias to try



Euphorbia amygdaloides 'Purpurea'

Evergreen perennial with deep purple stems. Lime-green flowers in spring and summer. Height: 30cm (1ft), spread: 60cm (2ft).



Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost'

Clouds of white flowers froth forth from spring and often beyond summer. Frost tender. Height: 45cm (1ft 5in), spread: 30cm (1ft).



Euphorbia epithymoides

Pretty perennial with acid yellow flowers. Team with blue spring flowers for a vibrant look. Height and spread: 40cm (1ft 3in).



Euphorbia griffithii 'Fireglow'

Perfect for a hot border, with green leaves and orange-red blooms that fade to yellow. Height: 75cm (2ft 5in), spread: 90cm (3ft).

Fact

Some euphorbias, such as *E. lactea* and *E. trigona*, are mistaken for cacti as they have thick, fleshy upright stems and spiny edges.

Flood-hit communities to be recognised

Neighbourhoods pulling together to overcome adversity, repairing damage inflicted by devastating floods, are to be honoured with a new RHS award. The discretionary Overcoming Adversity accolade will form part of the Britain in Bloom judging process, which this year involves 72 finalists around the UK. "Bloom groups are always very resilient when it comes to extreme weather, so we look forward to meeting all of them to see the wonderful work they are doing," said Chair of

Bloom judges Roger Burnett. Groups from Aberdeen, Kendal, Dalson, near Carlisle, and Corbridge in Northumberland, are among those hardest hit by recent deluges, with many

still cleaning up before their preparations for Britain in Bloom can begin. Dalson's bloom community has 2,000 bulbs planted north of the River

Caldew that are still under water, while award-winning Seaton Park in Aberdeen saw the worst flooding in its history.

"Some areas have been washed away and many are still under water. It's going to be a real challenge to get the park back to how it was," said Steven Shaw of Aberdeen City Council. **● Britain in Bloom judges will tour the UK, including Northern Ireland, from August with winners announced in October. Visit www.rhs.org.uk/communities**



Layering

Consider layering this spring as a way of propagating. Plant cells differ from those in our bodies in several ways. Perhaps, most important, is that they are 'totipotent', the scientific term for being able to do anything. Each plant cell contains all the genetic information needed to

turn into a leaf, stem, root or flower, mainly under the influence of various plant hormones.

Quite how these hormones stimulate the appearance of features where none grew before isn't known for sure, but a key trigger is injury. Prune the end of a stem and new sideshoots will appear, for example. Cut off and insert a section of stem in the soil and it will often develop roots.

A possible problem with cuttings is that the stem is separated from the plant and must be induced to develop roots before

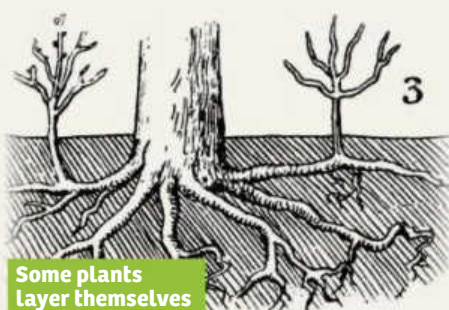
it can exhaust its limited store of energy. An easier propagation technique is to encourage roots to grow before the potential new plant is deprived of the support of its parent.

Low stems or branches of many woody species can be 'layered' to induce rooting wherever they touch the ground. A pliable stem is bent down and pegged about half way along into the soil, or simply

held in place with a stone, with the protruding tip then tied upright to a stake. Wounding the buried part of the stem first with a cut or scrape attracts growth hormones to stimulate rooting around the abrasion.

Plants for layering between autumn and spring include camellias, hazels, daphnes, hydrangeas, cherries, grape vines and wisteria. Rooting usually takes a year.

**60
SECOND
Expert**



"If I was a plant, I'd be an English oak"

The first plant I ever grew

An agave. About 30 years ago, I was given a seed of an *Agave americana*. I grew it on and I still have that plant in the garden today! Also, at the age of nine I had my own allotment, and I loved to grow various vegetables for my family.

The plant that shaped the gardener I am today

It would have to be lampranthus. I love clambering around the clifftops at work here on St Michael's Mount to look at it. It's pretty hardy down here in Cornwall and lampranthus can withstand the battering elements, plus they're always bright and cheerful!

Darren Little

Assistant head gardener of the famous St Michael's Mount subtropical gardens near the southernmost tip of Cornwall. Despite the harsh, salty winds, a temperate microclimate is created by the Gulf Stream, meaning unlikely beautiful plants flourish on its granite ledges.

My favourite plant in the world

I'd have to say *Aloe polyphylla*, mainly for the uniformity of its neat spiral. It's nature's art at its best and a fantastic example of the Fibonacci sequence.

The plant that changed my life

Easy - the lily. My beautiful daughter's name!

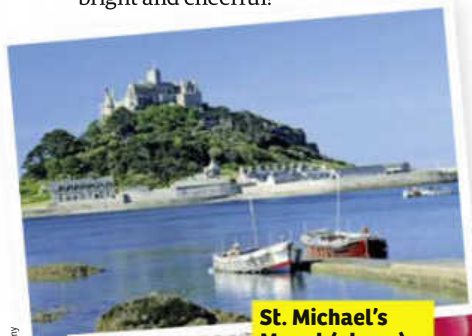
The plant that has made me work hardest

Puya alpestris. It has unusual, wonderful



Darren in his greenhouse of succulents

MY LIFE
In Plants



St. Michael's Mount (above). *Aloe polyphylla* (left) and a lily



sea-blue flowers, but with hefty spines on its leaves, it's a battle to weed around once it has matured!

The plant that sums up the human side of my job

Aeoniums. They are very like us, in that they are self-sufficient and look great all year round!

The plant I'd love to grow more

Bulbine frutescens - a lovely orange-yellow rhizomatous perennial that's hardy on the coast and mild areas of the UK. It looks great in large drifts and flowers for long periods during late summer. If I can grow more, the drifts will only get bigger and better!



Aeoniums are human-like in their habits

The plant I miss most while I'm travelling

Definitely *Armeria maritima*, or thrift, a classic Cornish coastal plant. There's no place like home in sunny Cornwall.

The plant I am in human form

A good old English oak, nature's greatest survivor in the horticultural world!

Longest greenhouse is good as new

The longest single glasshouse in National Trust hands has now been fully restored. The 130m (450ft) Long Range at Clumber Park, Worksop, near Nottingham, was erected over a 10-year period from the 1890s and runs along the entire run of the park's walled kitchen garden, an unusual feature for the time.

The 10-year-long project now sees the central Palm House in the Grade II-listed structure fully refurbished, involving cleaning and reusing the 2,1016 panes of glass and the replacement of 126 wooden

glazing bars. The framework needed almost 2.5 miles of paintwork.

The 12-section Grade II-listed range provides growing conditions for heritage fruit such as grape vines, peaches, nectarines and figs, as well as modern vegetable varieties. The central conservatory displays a wide selection of palm trees and other ornamental plants, such as palm trees, fuchsias and pelargoniums.

● Tel: 01909 544917 or visit www.nationaltrust.org.uk/clumberpark



Long Range is focus of the walled garden at Clumber Park

The Windowsill Gardener

Anthurium

Curiously shaped spathes in bright colours characterise anthuriums. Once thought of as rather an old-fashioned flower, these colourful tropical plants are a perfect match for ultra-modern interiors. They team well with '60s glass and mid-century furniture!

Commonly called flamingo flowers they come in a range of colours, from white to deep burgundy, set off by glossy heart-shaped leaves. They are very low maintenance but need good, well-drained soil. Avoid over watering, which can rot the stems. Let the compost become almost dry between waterings. Feed sparingly, once every six weeks or so is enough. Keep the plants in bright but filtered light, and out of draughts.



Flamingo flowers originate in Costa Rican rainforest

Shutterstock

Know YOUR Enemy



Winter wet is a bigger killer than drought

Shutterstock

Waterlogged pots

More plants are killed by waterlogging than die of drought. In winter and spring, with sharp changes of temperature and copious rainfall, this is even more of a problem. Waterlogged roots spell death for plants, and plants in pots are especially vulnerable.

Remedy: Move containers away from areas of run-off such as near guttering or sloping roofs. Always use pots with good drainage holes, and add pieces of broken pot to stop the holes getting clogged with wet soil. Put the pots on pot feet or raise them on bricks to help water drain away. If water is visible on the surface of the containers, act fast and tip it out. Remove the plants and check the roots, if they are black and sodden the plant is probably dead, but check by scraping a piece of bark, if its still green replant into fresh compost, to help the plant recover.

Roses celebrate stars

Children's author Roald Dahl is to be honoured with the launch of a namesake rose.

David Austin Roses has bred the new hybrid tea variety, to be unveiled at this year's Chelsea show, in celebration of the centenary of his birth.

A percentage from the sale of the free-flowering, tea-scented rose will be donated to Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity.

Alamy



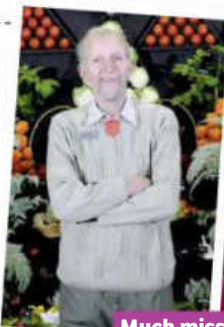
Roald Dahl's life will be profiled throughout the year



David Austin Roses

● **Late Yorkshire gardening guru Joe Maiden, who died in September, is to have a rose named after him. Bred by Tony Bracegirdle, the rose will be launched at the Ryedale Rose Festival at Pickering, north Yorkshire in July 2017.**

David Wrice



Much missed – Joe Maiden. Right: Hybrid Tea rose 'Joe Maiden' is ideal for the showbench or garden



Beware what you sow

Rise of the triffid



Growing menace (right), the kudzu vine has attractive pea-flowers

The misery of battling bindweed pales into insignificance when compared to the rampageous kudzu vine, *Pueraria montana*.

This attractive Asian pea-relative is bindweed on steroids. Introduced into the USA as an ornamental in 1876, by the

depression-blighted 1930s its ease of growth and adaptability made it seem ideal for erosion control, soil improvement or forage.

Farmers in the south were paid \$8 an acre to sow the plant, eventually covering one million acres with it. Rapid growth, often 18-30m (60-100ft) a year, soon

transformed opinion of the twiner from lifesaver to devil incarnate, as it swamped all before it, including trees, buildings, telegraph poles and, in fact, anything standing still long enough for its twining stems and tendrils to grasp.

For more kudzu scenes, visit www.jjanthony.com/kudzu



The shack is visible in winter



Spring sees the vine awaken



By mid summer, it's rampant



Scene swamped by late summer

A Shade Greener



Peacock butterfly on buddleia



Red Admiral feeding on flower heads

our planting help? The sole food plant for these, one of Britain's rarest butterflies, is kidney vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*). The larvae live only in the flower heads, where they feed on developing anthers and seed.

Wildflower meadows planted at this time of year will help all early-emerging insects. However, when butterflies emerge in winter they are unlikely to survive a cold snap. Putting them into a butterfly hibernation box could be the difference between life and death. There are also more than 2,400 moth species in the UK. To help them, plant evening-blossoming flowers, such as wild honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), silver ghost (*Eryngium giganteum*) and Red valerian (*Centranthus ruber*).

And don't forget about the bees, which favour flowers such as allium, aquilegia, crocus and echinops. Site bee-friendly plants in sunny places where they will prove most attractive to the insects, and avoid spraying pesticides, advises the RSPB.

Emerging early

Gardeners are among the best-placed to help wildlife that is confused by our unusually mild winters, the RSPB tells us. Butterflies, moths and bees are nectar feeders and need flowers for their

survival, but some are now emerging earlier than normal due to shifts in the climate. Data is still being collected about this winter, but in 2012 a warm March saw butterflies emerge very early, including 'small blues'. How can



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AboutNOW

Bats such as pipistrelles come out of hibernation in spring, looking to roost



Wildlife Watch

With Julian Rollins



Think outside the bat box

Improve your chances of encouraging roosting bats to visit your garden

Some experts, including TV naturalist Chris Packham, say that garden bat boxes are a waste of time and claim that you'd do more for bat conservation by arguing the case against pesticides. But because I'm an optimist (is that bat box half empty or half full?) I do both.



Put up a cluster of bat boxes for summer roosting

While I was online shopping for a new bat box today, I came across one review saying: 'The box has been up for seven-plus months and at the last count I have 30 bats.' Yes the review might be fake, but it's worth spending £20 on the off-chance.

1 Welcome summer-roosting bats Experts tell us that bats are very picky and are only likely to use a garden bat box as a summer roost, not for winter hibernation. You need to find just the right spot. It has to be warm, draught-free, at least 2m (6½ft) above ground and, surprisingly, although bats are night creatures, the box should have as little shade as possible.

2 Position in a sunny spot The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) recommends that a box faces south and is in full sun for six to 10 hours every day. In nature reserves, you might see boxes in clusters on tree trunks, each with a slightly different aspect. Bats can then choose the box with just the right amount of solar heating.

3 Make the surroundings bat friendly

The box is most likely to be used where there are plenty of insects to eat, but not too many other roosting sites to distract the bats. Include nectar sources to attract night-feeding bugs and site the box near a pond, if you can.

4 Follow a flight path bats like to use Re-use familiar flyways that go straight from A to B - so putting a bat box up close to a linear feature, such as a hedge or row of trees, slightly increases the chance of occupation.

5 Stay well clear Once you've installed your box, it's illegal to disturb or bother bats or their roost. Leave them well alone and watch from a respectful distance. What better way to pass half an hour on a summer's evening as dusk falls? Half-full glass in hand, of course?

Bats can also roost in tree crevices



Make a box

A bat box is a good afternoon DIY project:

- Use good, rough, untreated timber, to give occupants something to cling to.
- The BCT recommends the Kent Bat Box design on the Kent Bat Group website at www.kentbatgroup.org.uk
- For more help, download the bat box leaflet from the publications section of the BCT website - www.bats.org.uk



Frost covering wallflowers in Ian's garden

Weather Wise



With Ian Currie

It's a bit more like winter!

There were some half-melted flakes of snow mixed in with the rain on Saturday, February 13, when a low-pressure system moved along the English Channel and gave a raw day in the south.

In past decades, this situation would have given real snow that would have lain even in low-lying areas. However, with temperatures that bit higher these days, it was only the more elevated parts of Dartmoor where the snow settled. Snow did cover quite a few places in Scotland and northern England, particularly on the hills and moors.

When the low moved away and the night-time sky cleared there was quite a frost, down to -6C (21F) in the Midlands. In the Highlands of Scotland, the temperature plunged to a perishing -14.7C (5F) at Braemar.

The forecast looks changeable over the next fortnight, with frequent fluctuations from mild to cold and no prolonged settled weather.

We have too many plants that we want to protect during our colder nights, so we have erected a standard plastic mini greenhouse on a patio near the house. It's liberally weighed down by over a dozen bricks. We've added an additional layer of bubble wrap inside.

It has worked very well in sheltering and protecting plants such as cymbidiums, abutilons, fuchsias, geraniums and tender varieties of convolvulus. The key is not to let the plants touch the sides, as the leaves are liable to be damaged by frost.

● Visit Ian Currie's website at www.frostedearth.com

Mountainous MARVELS

Get creative with crevices, fit for exquisite alpine plants

Words Karen Murphy

Perhaps you want to add a new feature to your garden this year to add a little interest? Why not bring alive a wonderful and often under-used set of plants – alpenes – give them the best growing environment and help them stand out beautifully?

Crevice gardening is not a new idea, but it is widely recognised now to be a highly attractive, unusual and efficient way of gardening, as you are creating a mini landscape outdoors with a number of habitats for many plants in a small space.

Here, we tell you how you can easily create one of these gardens, and with the help of Chloe Wells, of RHS Garden Wisley's alpine team, give you some top tips on plants and planting.

How to make an alpine garden

1 Firstly, build your garden in early spring when there's less to do in the garden. It'll then be ready for a spring array of alpine plants, when they're more readily available and looking their best.

2 Choose an open, relatively sunny, weed-free and well-drained position. Start in the middle by placing some large keystone to act as a focus and an anchor for all the rest.

3 Bury the stones up to a third of their depth, aligned straightly together, and add your compost mix into most of the crevices.

4 Decide where you want all your plants while they're still in their pots, and water them well. Plant according to whether they need more shade or more soil, for example.

5 Watch out for pests, such as slugs and snails, and birds that might walk and peck for insects and damage plant form. Winter wet can do real damage so, to prevent this, give them lots of sun, plant high so they drain well, and, if need be, cover during prolonged rain.

With a little bit of space and the clever placing of rocks and slabs, you can create a beautiful alpine garden

Androsace brevis grows in the mountains of Lake Como

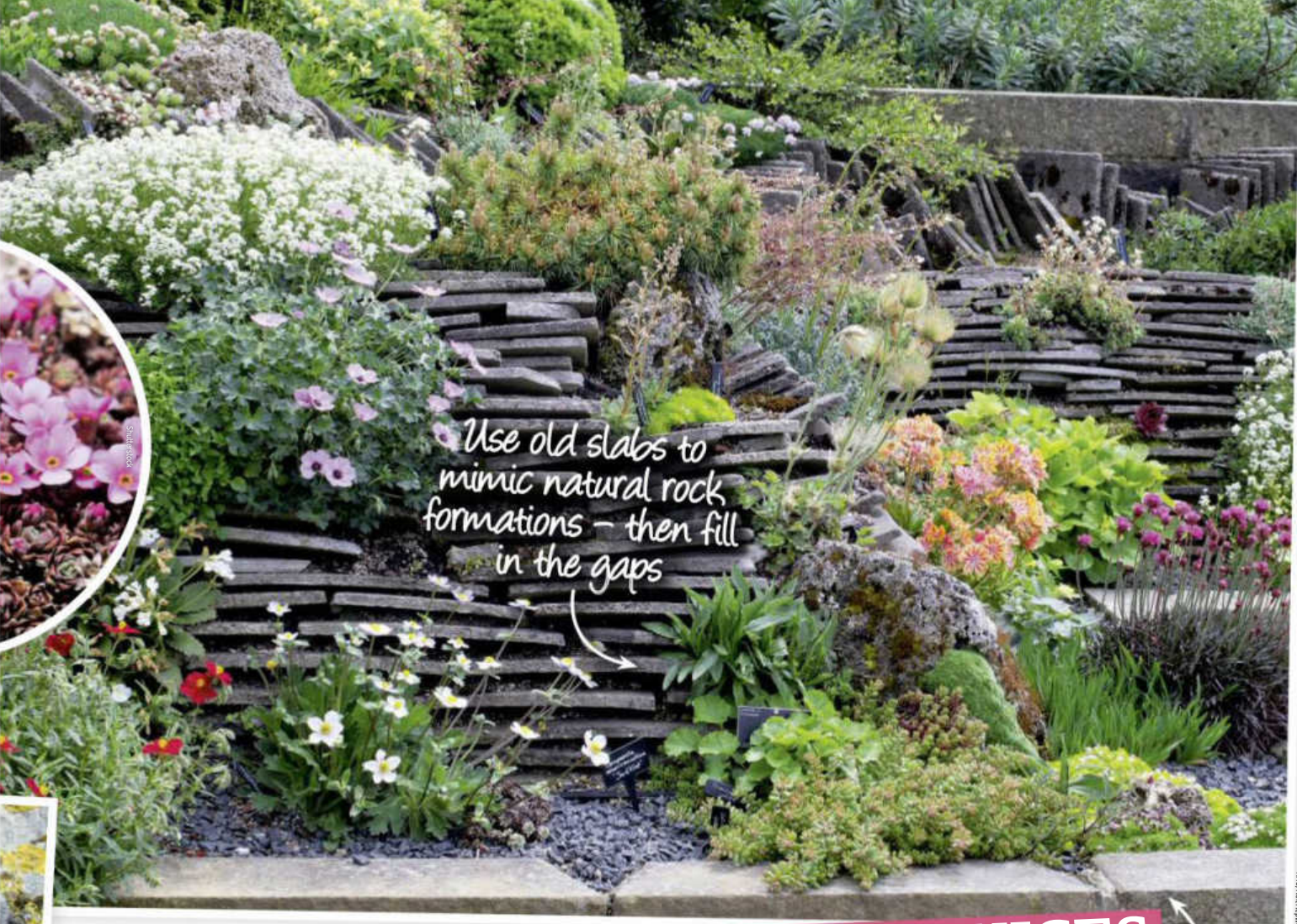
Cyclamen are hardy and suitable for shady areas

Create a mix of textures, shapes and sizes

A rock trough will quickly become a focal point

Chloe's top tips for planting

- Young plants or seedlings are best, as they still have relatively small roots.
- Wash the soil off the rootball to enable you to plant in the thin but deep gaps between the stones.
- Dry-tolerant plants will do better higher up from the ground, and moisture-loving plants will do better nearer the ground.
- Use the shadows created by the rock to grow a wider range of alpenes, such as hepaticas and saxifrages, which like shade.
- Check the size to which plants will grow, especially in troughs, and keep plantings in scale to the size of the rocks. Cut back seed heads regularly.
- Once established, feed in February and May with Vitax Q4 and water in.



RHS/Neil Hepworth

OTHER WAYS TO CRACK CREVICES

1 Make a mini crevice container If a larger crevice garden landscape is too ambitious for you, create the same conditions in a smaller space! Make sure your small makeshift container is well-drained, that the plants aren't crammed in too tightly, and that they have enough root space. Choose a few plants instead of lots that haven't enough space to grow.

2 Plant alpiners in gaps in paving and walls Make use of the crevices you already have and plant alpiners and rockery plants in gaps in your pavement or walls with nooks and crannies. You might have been wanting to fix or grout over those cracks, but why not get creative and green up your grey areas? Add a little compost into the gap, and tuck in your plant accordingly.

3 Pile up slate or slabs Instead of rocks, why not put to use that pile of slate or paving slabs you have left from a path or roofing project? The same principle applies - up-end the slabs, putting them in a natural haphazard form, though aligned straightly, and tuck in compost and plants into every corner. You'll be amazed at how quickly it thrives!



Succulents can grow in the tiniest of cracks

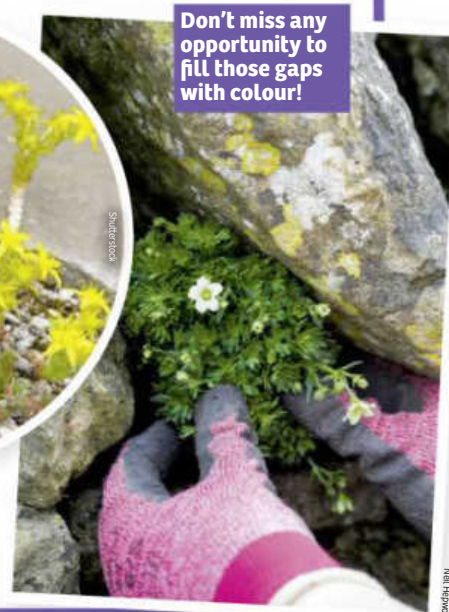
Fill gaps with plants such as *Arenaria balearica*



Any nook in paving can be a suitable site for planting



Don't miss any opportunity to fill those gaps with colour!



Neil Hepworth

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EXPERT ALPINE ADVICE

Chloe Wells, from RHS Garden Wisley's alpine team, gives an insight into its brand-new Crevice Garden and tells us why this type of gardening is a fantastic addition to your outdoor space...



"Wisley's Rock Garden celebrated its centenary in 2011 and our Crevice Garden was built to commemorate this. It demonstrates the importance of replicating natural conditions when growing alpine plants. The Rock Garden was built in 1911 with 550 tons of rocks, and boulders weighing up to two

tons each. The only way to get them across the garden was to build a railway!

We were honoured to be joined by Zdenek Zvolanek from the Czech Republic, who leads in this style of planting build, over a two-week period in November 2011, when all the rocks were placed in the new Crevice Garden. He rejoined us the following March to begin the planting, which continues to this day, with all sorts of wonderful species. We built the garden using sandstone and sharp sand, although in a normal garden setting I would recommend using a half sand and half John Innes No 2 compost mix."

The thriving Crevice Garden at RHS Garden Wisley



RHS/Liz Grant

The benefits of crevice gardening

- Crevices cause roots to grow downwards and provide a free root run.
- Conditions in a deep crevice are relatively stable, reducing the stress on plants that swings of temperature and moisture levels can cause.
- Even on hot days, water condenses on crevice walls and evaporation is reduced, further stabilising water availability.
- At the same time, drainage is good, due to the nature of a crevice garden being full of gaps and flow-through.
- Creates a wide range of niches, so you can grow a vast range of plants – ones that need more soil space, or ones that thrive without, for example.



Discover a treasure trove of unexpected delights

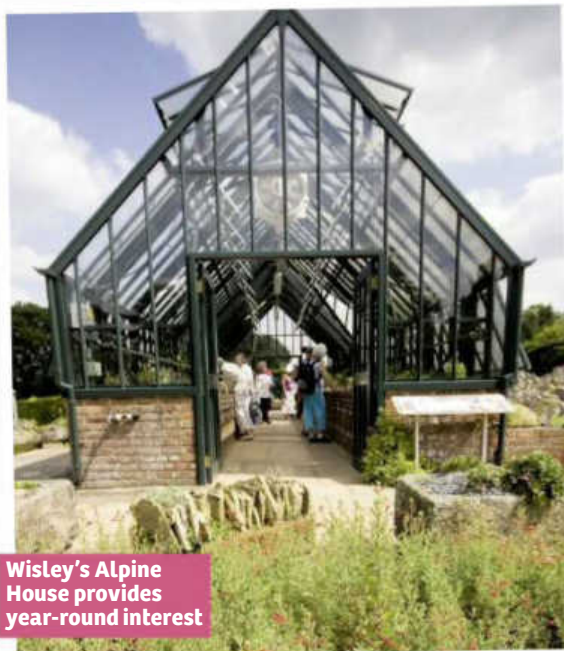
See page 48 for more from our experts on saxifrage and alpine care

A day out at Wisley

One of the great gardens of the world, the flagship RHS garden at Wisley in Surrey boasts beautiful mixed borders, exotics on Battleston Hill, acres of grassland and world-class plant collections in the Glasshouse.

- The Alpine Garden Society Show at Wisley is being held on March 13, between 10am and 4pm.
- As part of National Gardening Week at Wisley, Chloe Wells will be doing trough building and planting demonstrations at 2pm on Wednesday April 13 in the Alpine Department.
- Wisley's Spring Plant Fair runs between March 18 and 20.

RHS Garden Wisley, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB. Visit www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisley for more information.



Wisley's Alpine House provides year-round interest

RHS/Coral Sheppard



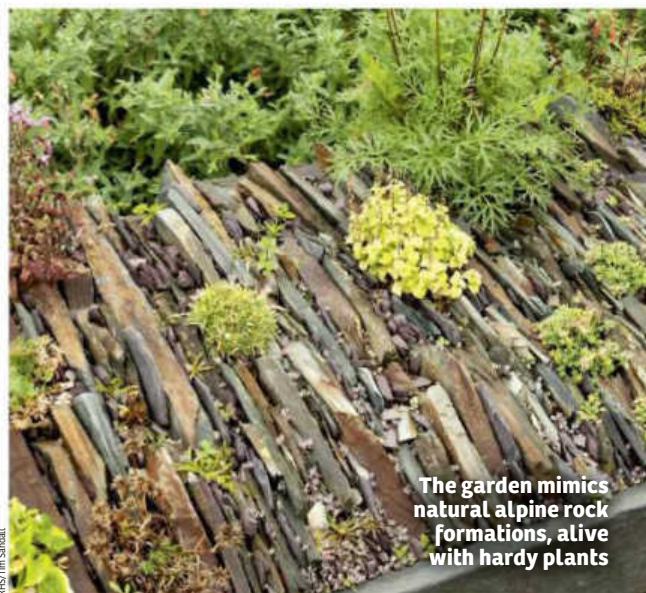
Chloe's key tips for building

- Lay the stones upended and parallel to one another, travelling in the same direction, mimicking the layers of sedimentary rock.
- Leave 5cm (2in) gaps between slabs, fill and compact with soil mix.
- Gently tap smaller rocks (in the same direction) around the plant to keep soil from washing away, prevent water from lingering round the neck of the plant and maintain the natural look.
- You might need to cement in the rocks at the edges. If you use large rocks, the compacted soil between the rocks will prevent much movement – I walk all over ours!

Alamy



Your crevice garden doesn't have to be as grand as the Lion Grotto at Dewstow Gardens, Chepstow, but it does go to show that even the biggest areas of grey wall can become a green space



The garden mimics natural alpine rock formations, alive with hardy plants

RHS/Tim Smedley



Go bold with large rows or with subtle narrow cracks

Shutterstock

Continues over the page

From the sublime to the ridiculous

CHOICE ALPINES TO TRY!

1 *Saxifraga fortunei* 'Black Ruby' A stylish and dramatic choice of saxifrage, with deep bronze-black thick leaves and almost fluorescent-pink irregular blooms. A woodland species introduced in 1863 by Scottish plant hunter Robert Fortune, can withstand severe winters and flowers in late summer and autumn.

2 *Puschkinia scilloides* Wonderful little striped squill, or Russian snowdrops, grace a rockery beautifully in spring with their spikes of intricate, blue-lined, star blooms. Also an unusual choice for your patio pots, and likes the shade. Flowers in spring after planting it in autumn.

3 *Primula allionii* Well-known for being an avid-flowering rock-garden primula, with arguably the daintiest and prettiest frilly blooms in the genus. More commonly in pink and lilac flower shades, in the wild it grows on the limestone cliff faces of southern France and northern Italy. Very hardy and needs well-drained, cool conditions.

4 *Hepatica nobilis* Rather anemone-like, this hepatica species is a hardy woodland plant, and has often been mistaken for them. It's hungry and likes a humus-rich, heavy soil to thrive in. One for a shady rock-garden crevice for spring flowering. A wide range of hepaticas are grown and can be seen in the RHS Garden Wisley alpine section.

5 *Sedum acre* This will slowly scramble over your rock crevices, forming a dense mat of succulent evergreen foliage, as well as bright and sunny yellow star flowers in summer and autumn, loved by hoverflies in particular.

6 *Raoulia eximia* A weird and wonderful plant, also known as New Zealand vegetable sheep, as it looks very similar from a distance in its native South Island mountain ranges! An extremely rare, cushion-forming perennial with tightly-packed silver-haired rosettes and spring-summer yellow and white flowers. Very slow growing, it's been known to reach 10cm (4in) in about 15 years!



Puschkinia scilloides is perfect for shady spots



Saxifraga fortunei can withstand harsh winters



Primula allionii needs a well-drained location



Raoulia eximia – sometimes mistaken for a sheep!



Hepatica nobilis likes shade and a heavy soil



Sedum acre provides a splash of vibrant yellow



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Create a living structure

Naturally stylish, a willow display is an attractive addition to the garden and an easy weekend project

Happy in most soils, creating a willow display is easier than you might think

Words Melissa Mabbitt

Living willow structures are fun and surprisingly easy gardening projects for late spring. Around now willow coppicing will be happening at country parks and managed woodlands - see if you can pick up some stems for free by calling your local nature reserve.

Designs run from the simple - a line of stems to make a windbreak, for example - to elaborate palaces of twisting stalk and leaf. Some gardeners even use living willow to make intricate sculptures or seats. Many varieties have beautiful red, yellow, purple or even black stems, so while in summer they are softened by leaf, in the winter they take on a colourful, architectural beauty.

You can use one or two-year-old stems - the younger the growth, the more whippy and flexible it will be, so choose

material that's suitable for your design. If you can't find any going free, there are also plenty of places to buy living willow rods that have been specially prepared for making structures and sculptures. They often come in kits with unique design instructions, but making a display can be as simple as pushing some stems into the ground and leaving them to nature.

Willow is one of those plants that will strike in almost all conditions once it's pushed into the ground. In fact, it's best not to use willow stems as plant supports because invariably the willow will grow away while the plant you actually want withers!

Just make sure your location is bright and spacious. Willows prefer direct sun or partial shade, and your structure will need space to grow. Once established, the main arrangement will put on lots of new growth, throwing



Ensure your structure has direct sun or just partial shade, and plenty of room to grow

up long stems that need to be pruned back each year. The willow will put down lots of root, too, so locate it somewhere where it's not competing with large trees or dense plantings. The classic position is on a lawn, perhaps tucked to one side.

You can even plant a willow

structure on a slope, but make sure the rods are vertical rather than at a right angle to the ground, or you will end up with a wonky structure!

Once collected, keep your cut willow rods in a bucket of water outside until you need them. Don't worry if the water

Continues over the page

freezes - it won't do any harm. If they have started making roots, cut off that part before planting. Don't be tempted to plant them complete with roots on, as they will be damaged in the process.

You can be as thorough or as lazy as you like with ground preparation - willow will strike reliably in most soils with no special groundwork. In fact, digging the ground over before you plant the stems can be detrimental because it makes the structure less stable.

The willow will grow best if you remove competition from the roots, but it's not absolutely necessary if you want the more natural look of willow growing in among long grass. To prevent weeds and grass growing at the base, use a strip of weed-suppressing membrane covered in a layer of woodchip.

In a normal spring there will be enough rain to allow the willow to establish. However, from March onwards, if the weather is dry, soak the soil around the structure with a few buckets of water or, if you have a sprinkler, set it up to water the structure overnight. Do this every week if there's an extended dry period.

Once established, willow is very resilient and doesn't need to be watered unless a lengthy hot period starts to make the leaves yellow or wilt.

Though willow is a tough and easy-to-grow plant, it

A loosely woven framework makes a good wind break

is attractive to a few garden pests. Rabbits and deer are partial to the new shoots and bark, and their nibbling can cause dieback. If they are a problem in your garden put tree spirals around the base of each willow stem to deter them.

Black aphids are attracted to the leaf stems in summer, and though they don't damage the willow they do attract wasps, which feed on the honeydew they produce. Bear this in mind if your structure is meant for children. If this is the case, it's a good idea to spray the leaves with an organic soft soap several times to control the aphids.

DID YOU KNOW?

If you want to learn more about living willow structures, try a weekend course. Nature reserves and wetland centres often run them.

**Left: Alternate gold and green stems
Above: Pick up coppiced stems at your local nature reserve**

DESIGN IDEAS



ARBOUR

Create a wide semi-circular ring of willow tied or woven together at the top to make an arch. Place a bench or table underneath for a shady place to relax in summer.



PLAY DEN

Make a circle with a winding entrance for a fun place for kids to play hide-and-seek or have their own very important garden meetings!

How to make your own living willow display



Unless it's just been cut, trim the willow whips by a few inches at the bottom. This will remove any air inside the stem.



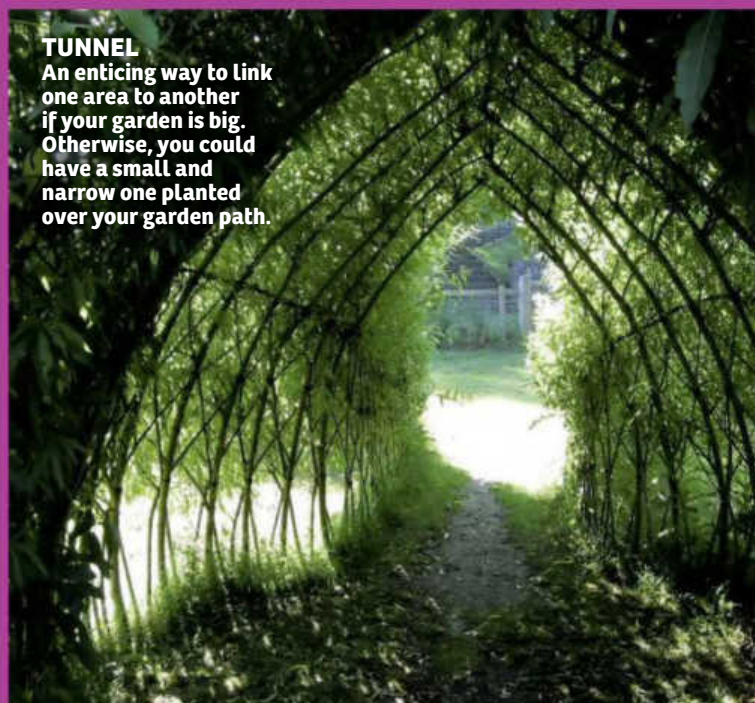
Draw out your design on the ground using a hose, sand or string. You can use string tied to a central peg to draw a neat circle.



Use a screwdriver to make holes in the soil a few inches deep and push the willow in, pressing the soil back, if needed, so it's in contact with the stem.



'FEDGE'
Make a feature of your garden's boundaries with a living fence. Halfway between a hedge and a fence, this structure has been affectionately labelled the 'fedge'.



TUNNEL
An enticing way to link one area to another if your garden is big. Otherwise, you could have a small and narrow one planted over your garden path.

Expert tips



Steve Pickup, The Willow Bank, living willow structure specialists

Willow structures are made up of uprights and weavers. The uprights are the main framework, the weavers used as infill, giving the structure added strength.

Make each hole deep enough and wide enough to plant one upright and two weavers 30cm (1ft) deep. Plant the uprights butt-end first. If you need to push, hold the rod near the butt end to avoid buckling. Then place a spare piece of willow binder horizontally at 1m (3ft 3in) high against the outside of the uprights, leaving 15cm (6in) of the butt end sticking out beyond the corner upright. This is a binder, which holds the uprights parallel to each other, while the weavers are planted.

The best way to use the weavers is to work downwards from the level of the binder, leading with the butt, passing it in front and behind uprights and finally planting it into the hole. How far you bend and weave these pieces will depend on your design, but you should plant two weavers in

How to weave living willow

the hole alongside every upright.

Make gentle curves and avoid kinking. If a willow rod is kinked, the flow of sap will be interrupted and may cause dieback. You can soften the fibres and make it easier to bend by rubbing the willow rod vigorously with your palm. Wear a glove to avoid skin burn.

When weaving the second row of weavers, pass the weaver in front or behind the first row of weavers following the line of least resistance and avoiding kinking. Tie the structure with string to begin with. It's likely that you'll need to tweak it as you go along.

When you have finished, stand back and check if you are happy with everything. Are the weavers evenly spaced and making nice diamond-shaped patterns? When you are happy, remove the string ties and replace with a flexible tie, one tie at a time.

● *The Willow Bank is running a foundation course in living willow structures on February 27 and an advanced course on February 28, 2016, priced £60 each. Call 01594 861782 for details or to order willow, or visit www.thewillowbank.com.*

The Willow Bank, Ragmans Lane Farm, Lower Lydbrook, Gloucestershire GL17 9PA.

How to keep your structure in shape

Living willow structures are low maintenance, but not no maintenance. To keep them to shape, the new growth should be trimmed two or three times during the growing season with shears or a hedge cutter. Leave some leaves on, though, as these are needed to keep the plant healthy.

New growth can also be woven into the structure every year to strengthen it or change the design. But once the desired structure is achieved, the willow should be hard pruned every winter back to the main framework.

An alternative method is to allow the shoots to grow to full length during the summer (they might reach 3m/10ft tall) then harvest them as long rods in winter. You can then use them for new structures or other projects in the garden, such as woven hurdles for fencing.

Willow stem suppliers

- *The Willow Bank, tel: 01594 861782; www.thewillowbank.com*
- *Yorkshire Willow, tel: 01706 839 170; www.yorkshirewillow.co.uk*
- *Water Willows, tel: 0845 020 4225; www.waterwillows.com*
- *Willows Nursery, tel: 01536 791371; www.willowkits.co.uk*

Garden News RECOMMENDS

Colourful willow



***Salix alba vitellina* 'Britzensis'** One of the best willows for a living structure, with bright red and orange winter stems. Let it grow to enjoy all year, before pruning late on.



Salix daphnoides The young shoots of this willow are dark purple but take on an attractive silvery-grey bloom in winter. Long silky grey catkins come in spring.



***Salix alba* 'Golden Ness'**

Grown for its burnished-gold winter stem colour. A good choice for damp or wet soils, but will tolerate any normal garden soil.



***Salix gracilistyla* 'Melanostachys'**

A shrubby willow that will produce slower-growing red stems, but the highlight is the jet-black shaggy catkins produced in spring.

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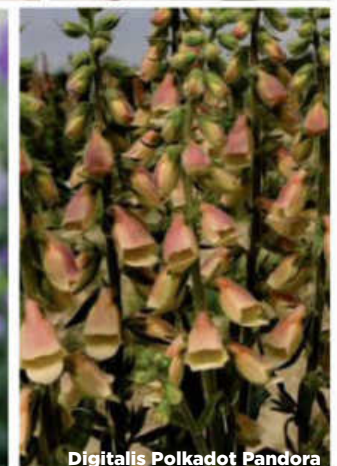
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Digitalis purpurea Sugar Plum

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Garden OF THE WEEK



A stroll through the garden with...

Gardener Sue Beesley

Location Bluebell Cottage, Lodge Lane, Dutton, near Warrington, Cheshire WA4 4HP

Been in garden 9 years

Size of garden 1.5 acres

Soil Sandy loam

Open April 1 to September 30, 10am-5pm, Wednesday-Sunday plus Bank Holidays

Purple patch

The award-winning owner of this cottage garden in Cheshire has planted a riot of mauve, purple and pink blooms, with fearless splashes of bright colours for a contemporary look

Words Melissa Mabbitt

Photos Joe Wainwright

Sue Beesley's colourful cottage plot in rural Cheshire proves how life-changing gardening can be. After winning the BBC Gardener of the Year competition in 2006, she left her career in IT and took on Bluebell Cottage and its nursery, swapping a job behind a computer screen for a life in the open air. Right now, Sue gets to

enjoy that fresh air while getting the garden ready for its first spring opening.

She stumbled upon the garden while looking for plants for the competition and when it came up for sale later, she and husband Dave decided to take it on. Though the nursery was run down and on the brink of closing, they sold their house and leapt into the unknown.

When they moved in, the garden had not been touched


for six months, but was booked to open for the NGS in just a few short weeks.

"We had to whip that garden into shape for April, so as much as I wanted to go round slowly and take everything in, we had to plough in with barrows, clearing up fallen debris and weeds, tackling the lawn that was six inches high. At least it made us get it done!" she laughs.

Then it was a case of trying to identify all the plants in the

garden. "It was a little bit like having a garden-sized advent calendar. Every day I spotted something coming into flower, and I had to find out what it was by deciphering the original drawings or finding a label," she says.

Working with what was already a mature garden, Sue gradually deepened the borders, making straight lines into sweeping curves and filling them out with bright, swaying



Flower spikes are teamed against flat umbels for contrasting textures

Sue plants in drifts and clumps to create a sense of rhythm in the borders

Unlike other biennial umbellifer, *Cenolophium denudatum* is perennial

Astrantia major grows well on a dry shingle bank

herbaceous perennials.

Winning a big competition is bound to boost any gardener's self-assurance, and Sue is certainly confident with colour. Her chosen plants paint a picture, with rich purples and pinks splashed with vivid oranges and reds. Throughout, ornamental grasses give the beds a modern twist, adding texture and movement, and acting as buff-coloured counterpoints for the brighter stars of the show.

She emphasises that she's not a garden designer, so the garden has been a slow evolution, changed by walking around and taking in the scene.

The plants always take centre stage, with paths alongside so

the beds can be seen close up.

The planting style is relaxed but composed.

"I plant in drifts and clumps to create a repeating rhythm, but I'm also very interested in the plants themselves. I use more varieties than a designer would - they might stick to one repeated variety - but I'll choose four different kinds. The flowers are the same shape but slightly different colours, and it pleases me to see the variations," she explains.

One of Sue's favourite group of plants is the thalictrum, with their dainty flower heads like little pearls or puffballs of colour on tall, waving stems. They can grow to about five feet tall, so add

Continues over the page

Garden OF THE WEEK



Eye-popping colour combinations such as bright orange Californian poppy and purple allium

useful height to the border, their airiness giving it a light touch.

Using a variety of heights is integral to the design: "The borders are wide, so lots of heights can be used. I'm not afraid to have height at the front of a border," Sue says.

Growing lots of perennials means that most of the maintenance happens in early spring. At this time of year, Sue is busy cutting down and tidying, after leaving stems to stand for the winter. As much organic material as possible is left to drop of its own accord, and seed heads are left standing to provide food for birds. "We don't do an autumn clear up, we just walk away and leave it," she says.

In spring, a process she calls the 'chop and drop' starts. Instead of barrowing away the debris for compost, they put the dead stems through a shredder or use shears to chop it very small, then put it straight back on the beds. If it's cut tiny enough and it's arranged in neat rings around plants, it's an attractive and labour-saving way to recycle the organic matter.

"It has to look deliberate," Sue explains. "We want to make it look good, as we open in spring and have lots of bulbs coming up. The front two feet of bed has to look nice and clean, but further back we can just push the

chopped bits down among the plants or cover it with mulch."

Though the garden is full of very modern-looking perennial planting, there are traditional features too. Around the house, smaller borders are filled with cottage garden plants, such as roses, carnations and peonies. There's a small orchard undersown with a pretty

wildflower meadow and a veg plot is arranged with neat box hedges marking out the beds.


But Sue's style is definitely a thoroughly contemporary one. In the one-and-a-half acre plot, she has created an exotic-looking but hardy garden, with big, bold leaves and hot colours, along with stylish perennial borders.

"The areas I've had my hands


on are definitely more modern!" she says. "Early on there was lots I wanted to change, but I've worked with what I've got and, though I still make big changes every year, I'm reasonably happy now. Each area has a distinct theme, but the garden is very much focussed on perennials in distinctive, interesting combinations."



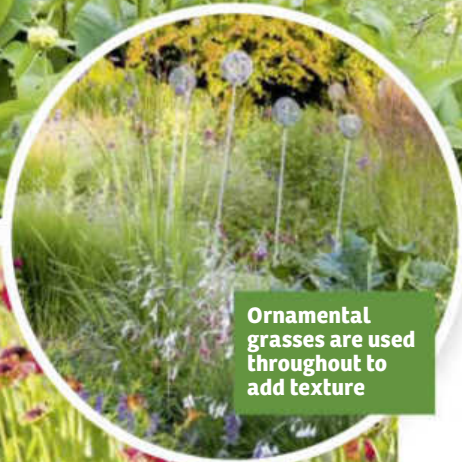
Sue has created a cottage garden with a modern twist




Modern garden ornaments echo the rounded flowers of *Papaver somniferum*, while an evergreen hedge and arch add more structure



Heleniums bring warmth to the scheme



Ornamental grasses are used throughout to add texture



Roses and astrantia grow along the pond edge

Continues over the page

Sue's perfect perennials



Geranium psilostemon

Brilliant flowers with a black eye make this a hardy geranium that stands out anywhere. Height: 40cm (16in).



Papaver somniferum

An annual, but self-seeds so readily you can rely on it to bring a palette of mauves year after year. Height 60cm (2ft).



Astrantia major

An easy-to-grow perennial that never flops. Height: 50cm (20in).



Thalictrum aquilegifolium

Brilliant for adding airy height to a border. Height 1.5m (5ft).



Hemerocallis 'Stafford'

A star performer in the borders at Bluebell Cottage. Height: 90cm (3ft).



Achillea 'Walter Funke'

One of the best red yarrows, with orange flowers that deepen to terracotta. Height: 70cm (2ft 4in).



Salvia nemorosa

Spikes of long-lasting purple spikes from mid to late summer. Deadhead to prolong even further. Height 60cm (2ft).

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CAROL KLEIN



This week AT GLEBE COTTAGE

You couldn't accuse most wild flowers of being ostentatious, but there are a few who seem especially shy. *Pulmonaria longifolia* and *pulmonaria officinalis*, our wild lungworts, are a good example. Though they are both British natives you are unlikely to come across them, not only are they shy, but they are very rare.

As members of the boraginaceae family they exhibit the usual ratio of flower-to-foliage volume – about one to ten. Nonetheless, their bright little flowers in shades of red and blue, often both at the same time, are treasured early in the year, not only by humans but by bees too.

Most perennial plants use winter as an opportunity to hibernate, gathering their strength underground to produce the shoots and flowers of the new season. Only a few exceptional perennials keep their leaves, and for us gardeners they provide a continuum

between the old season and the new. Reaching their peak at this time of year, plants need to be robust. Toughing it out through rain, snow and frost demands a strong constitution. Pulmonarias have rough, durable leaves perfectly adapted to winter

weather. Their handsome foliage, bespangled with silver splodges and spots, sparkles among the winter mire. Easy to grow, they thrive even in the most unprepossessing places, in dark, dank corners and even in wet heavy clay.

They are 'must-have' plants, in their glory during the first months of the year. Since their foliage is evergreen, they go on to provide a useful background to later-flowering woodlanders

or summer perennials, and though they are happy in shade they will cope with sunnier spots too – the silver-leaved varieties are happiest in sun.

In some pulmonarias, the spots join up to create silver leaves. These can be heart-shaped, as in pulmonaria 'Majesté', or narrow and linear as in pulmonaria 'Cotton Cool'.

This pulmonaria was named after her garden where she discovered it, by Hazel Bishop. We had a lovely day filming there for *Gardeners' World*. Sadly Hazel died but she and her plant live on, celebrated in a beautiful vase designed by one of her daughters Rachel, who is a senior designer at the celebrated Moorcroft pottery. I was very honoured to be given one of these vases by Rachel. It's a beautiful tribute to a very special lady and the lovely plant she discovered.

A Dutch selection from

Exceptional perennials

Pulmonarias are 'must-have' plants treasured for their bespangled leaves and early flowers

Pulmonaria rubra
cheers the most dismal
parts of the garden



Pulmonaria officinalis



Cyclamen coum

What's looking good now

Cyclamen coum

When we went to Wales last week to Gelli Uchaff in Carmarthenshire, conditions were cold and bleak, but the garden was sparkling with the blooms of the first spring bulbs. Perhaps the most eye-catching were the dumpy little flowers of *Cyclamen coum* in vivid magenta, pink and white. Because it is dormant for several months of the year, it is easy to forget what a joyful little plant it is. Its old name was *Cyclamen orbiculare* because of the round shape of its leaves.

Unlike its close relation

Cyclamen hederifolium, whose flowers come out in early autumn followed by the leaves, both the flowers and foliage of *Cyclamen coum* come out together. Its leaves are round and slightly shiny so that water runs off them and, to an extent, they protect the buds, acting as mini-umbrellas. Buds are furled and face downwards but, when the petals start to open, they reflex almost like a propeller.

When seed is set, the flower stem curls, turning itself into a spring and bringing the seedpod down to ground level. Eventually it splits and the starch in the coating of the seeds turns to sugar – irresistible to ants who carry the seed away, eat the coating and abandon the seed creating ever bigger colonies.

Thanks to extensive hybridisation by Ashwood Nursery and others, there are now many silver-leaved and patterned *Cyclamen coum*.

● **Stockists:** Ashwood Nurseries, tel: 01384 401996; www.ashwoodnurseries.com



Cyclamen coum 'Ashwood Snowflake'

Coen Jansen, *Pulmonaria longifolia* 'Ankum', has long narrow silvery leaves with a smart dark green edge. Young leaves are heavily spotted with silver and eventually all the spots join up so that the whole leaf surface becomes iridescent. A collection of these plants in winter looks like a colony of silver starfish.

Selections of *Pulmonaria officinalis* and *Pulmonaria saccharata* offer flowers in a range of blues and reds. Some of the most appealing are those with pale blue flowers, 'Opal' and 'Roy Davison' are two of the best.

Pulmonaria with its pink and blue flowers is also known as soldiers and sailors and Joseph and Mary



Often the first lungwort to flower, *Pulmonaria rubra* cheers up the most dismal reaches of the garden with its light green leaves and coral-coloured flowers. It is an 'obvious' plant, some would describe it as

My gardening Diary



Our new eryngiums will shine in summer

MONDAY Proper frost forecast for tonight, so we're sowing more umbels, *Selinum wallichianum*, *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Raven's Wing' and several astrantias and eryngiums. When they're watered they're going outside so the frost can break their dormancy.

TUESDAY Mixing up compost in quantity. We have our own recipe and add lots of extra grit for subjects that need good drainage. Some of our seed trays are looking decidedly green, a sure sign they're too acid, so we're adding more lime in this mix.

WEDNESDAY During the recent gale-force winds, tragedy befell two of our most important trees. The silver-leaved pear, *Pyrrhus salicifolius*, and our eleagnus 'Quicksilver'. Both sustained severe damage. They've both been cut back and propped up.

THURSDAY It has been such a wet winter, much of our ground is covered in moss so, painstakingly, we're scraping it off all the beds in the brick garden before we start some major re-planting there, otherwise it gets mixed in and comes back even more thickly.



Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus or yellow daylily

FRIDAY Our gardener Jamie has gone through all our old pots and chucked any plants that are past saving. Now the idea is to get as many as possible into the ground. First off *Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus*. Its pale yellow flowers will bring an edge to the lower beds among all the pink and white.

SATURDAY Sowing a few herbs – there's nothing like harvesting them fresh. Concentrating on dill (my favourite), coriander and chervil. It's too early to sow basil and, anyway, for the past few years we've bought a pot of basil from the supermarket and divided it, giving each plant its own pot.

SUNDAY There are a couple of dozen *Ornithogalum arabicum* bulbs left in the shed from when we de-potted them and dried them out at the end of the autumn. The last of our clay pots are still empty so it seems a happy solution to plant one in the other. They're tender so will need protection.

Carol Klein



coarse, but it is jolly and dependable, often flowering before Christmas (one of its country names is 'Christmas Cowslip') and going on until March.

Pulmonaria rubra 'David Ward' is a version discovered by and named after the head of Beth Chatto's nursery. Its leaves have broad cream margins and this outlining helps the leaves

stand out well in shady places. Since it scorches when grown in full sun, use it in dark corners.

Pulmonarias are superb plants. Reliable and long-flowering, they brighten up the darkest days and take us into the new gardening year with a sense of optimism.

● **Stockists:** Beth Chatto Gardens, tel: 01206 822007; www.bethchatto.co.uk

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WHAT TO DO

THIS
WEEK

Meet
the
team

Jo Wright

Jo has an established garden with fruit trees, plus an allotment.

Ian Hodgson

A Kew-trained horticulturist, Ian is also a garden designer.

Karen Murphy

Keen fruit, veg and container gardener, Karen also loves wildlife.

Melissa Mabbitt

Having previously worked at the National Trust's Bodnant Garden, Melissa has RHS qualifications.

If you do just one job...

Prune winter dogwoods

Now's the best time if they're underplanted with spring bulbs

Cornus are invaluable in winter, when their bright stems add both fire and form to bare beds, even in the most dismal weather. The selection of stem colour is diverse, from the dark purple of *Cornus alba* 'Kesselringii' to the pillar-box red of *C. alba* 'Sibirica' and the golden-green of *C. sericea* 'Flaviramea'. 'Midwinter Fire' is perhaps the most garden-worthy, with yellow stems that deepen to orange on the way up and then to red at the tips.

They come into their own over winter, but now's the best time to prune them if they are planted among herbaceous plants and spring bulbs. Before long, these plants will start to take over and getting access will be more difficult. If access isn't a problem, you can wait until March to prune, just as new leaf buds start to emerge.

There are two ways of pruning dogwoods. The simple approach is to cut all the stems down to a few inches from the ground, creating a low 'stool'. This will stay the same size each year and produce more and more colourful stems. The cornus will also be kept smaller.

The second approach is to selectively thin out the branches. This is a good method for 'Midwinter Fire', because more of the colour graduation from yellow to red will be preserved. If it is chopped down to the ground every year more of the golden-orange colouring will be lost. Select the oldest, thickest stems, or any that spoil the upright shape of the bush, and remove them at the base with secateurs or loppers. Take out one in three stems overall.

Selectively thin dogwood to keep red stems bright

Difference between willows and cornus

Cornus are not the only shrubs that have highly-coloured stems to be enjoyed in winter. Willow varieties can also produce bright yellow or red stems, and though they are often slightly larger, if they are pruned low each year it can be difficult to tell them

apart from cornus. There's one sure-fire way to identify the difference – by looking at the stems. Cornus always have two opposite buds and branches, whereas willows have alternate buds. Learn the difference and you won't be fooled again!



Red willow stems look similar to dogwoods.



Cornus have opposite buds and branches.



Willow buds are alternate on each stem.

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Editor

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Plant lily bulbs in containers

Blowsy blooms are easy to grow

If you didn't manage to get any lily bulbs planted in autumn, you can get them going now instead. They're easy to grow and will add a touch of the exotic to your garden when they burst open in summer with colourful, elegant blooms.

Use a deep ceramic pot filled with crocks or gravel for good drainage, and fill a little way with good multi-purpose

compost. Plant at around three times the bulb's depth, pointy end upwards. Tall lilies will need to be planted a little deeper. Fill up with compost, with some added handfuls of Vermiculite mixed in to aid drainage and to insulate.

A slow-release fertiliser, and a weekly dose of tomato feed throughout summer, will keep them well fed. Stake your taller ones and enjoy!



Garden News **RECOMMENDS**

Three of our favourites



Oriental lily 'Crimson Pixie'
Classic-looking dwarf lily with sumptuous red trumpets. This one's particularly good for pots, and brilliant for floral arrangements.



Lilium martagon
A Swiss native that is superbly hardy, despite looking exotic. Also known as Turk's cap lilies, they're actually fine for naturalising among woodland schemes.



Lilium regale
Surely one of the most spectacular lilies to grow, with bright white blooms and slashes of pink on its undersides. Beautifully scented and tall, with many heads on one stem.

Pot up begonia tubers



Tuberous begonias make a spectacular display in summer, and come in an amazing array of fringed, frilly and colourful blooms. Get planting a varied selection now in a frost-free greenhouse at a temperature of around 18C (64F). Simply fill a seed tray or individual pots with potting compost right to the top, then thumb in the tubers, hollow side up, at a depth of 2.5cm (1in) deep. If in a seed tray, once the tubers start sprouting leaves, pot into individual containers so they can grow separately.

Top tips to great lilies!

- Look out for lily beetles from next month! Pick them off at every opportunity or, for infestations, use Provado bug spray. Lily 'Defender Pink' is said to be resistant.
- When shoots appear from your bulbs, you can speed up flowering by popping your pot into a warm sunny area, at about 20C (68F).
- In winter in milder areas, your pots will enjoy a spell of cold, but in harsher places they may need fleece or bubble wrap, or bringing inside.

DREAMY DAHLIAS FOR YOUR GARDEN AND VASE

Easy dahlia
displays with
this collection
of beautiful
blooms.

Enjoy harmonious displays of plentiful summer blooms for both cutting and border. These plump dahlias are delicately blushed in shades of pink and violet, and these shifting pastel tones create a beautiful, fluid and serene display. The contrasting cactus and decorative flower forms work well together to create a well-balanced display in both the garden and the vase.

Dahlias are so easy to grow and so prolific, making them easily one of the most rewarding and worthwhile of our summer plants. With this tried and tested collection you can be sure of blooms which flower simultaneously and last well together in both border and vase.

The key to unrivalled summer long displays is simply to keep picking. Hand-graded and picked tubers are supplied from mid-March for potting on, although we find that planting direct into a sunny border once the frosts have passed gives better results. Half hardy, perennial.

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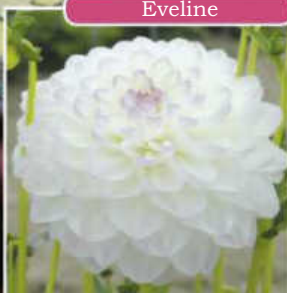
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Miss Sophie



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Last chance to plant bare-root roses

The bare-root season is nearly over, so if you want to plant roses in numbers for a lower outlay, get an order in immediately. As soon as your roses arrive, soak the roots in a bucket of water for a few hours. While you wait, dig a hole that will accommodate the roots – they are often long and awkward, so the hole may need to be quite deep, but bear in mind that the roots can be pruned if necessary.

Add plenty of well-rotted manure to the spoil heap and scatter a base-dressing of mycorrhizal fungi in the hole. These beneficial fungi will help the rose to extend its root area. Hold the rose upright in the hole while you back-fill the soil, firm in as you go, then water well. The grafting point should be at or just proud of the final soil surface level.

Pinch out wallflowers



If you planted bare-root wallflowers in autumn but didn't pinch them out at the time, do it now to encourage bushy plants with lots of flowering stems. Because it's been so mild, you might have already seen plenty of new growth, but don't be afraid to pinch it back nonetheless.

Pot on pelargonium cuttings

You can tell when pelargonium cuttings have started to develop a root system when they grow two or three new leaves. Taking cuttings in autumn is often the best way to overwinter these tender plants so that you have a stock for the following summer, without having to fork out for more.

If some of your autumn cuttings have sulked, they might not be warm enough. Move them somewhere warmer and brighter, but any cuttings that haven't rooted after two months should be given up as a lost cause.

Pot on rooted cuttings into 9cm (3½in) pots with general-purpose compost mixed with a generous helping of grit or Perlite. Keep them well watered and warm until you can plant them out after the risk of frost has passed.



GEOFF HODGE

Tools for THE JOB

Writer, TV and radio broadcaster and GN product guru

Geoff Hodge tests anvil secateurs to find the best

At this time of year lots of woody plants need pruning, including bush roses, summer-flowering clematis and winter and summer-flowering shrubs. You need to make sure your pruning equipment is up to the job. There are two main types of secateurs – bypass for cutting live wood and anvil for pruning dead wood. Anvil secateurs also cope better with thicker, denser wood.

BEST ANVIL SECATEURS

Faithfull Tools Samurai Anvil Secateurs 205mm £19.76

My Best Buy anvil secateurs of 2012 retain their crown! They feature a robust aluminium body, a SK5 high-carbon steel (regarded as being one of the best for cutting tools), non-stick coated cutting blade and a metal, grooved, serrated gripping anvil. The two-position locking switch adjusts the handle and mouth-opening widths, which is useful for those with small hands. Cutting widths: 25mm (1in) and 17mm (¾in). The hard plastic stop helped reduce the amount of shock transferred to the hand via the handles.

Supplier: Faithfull Tools, 01322 321415, www.faithfulltools.com



BEST SMALL ANVIL SECATEURS

Spear & Jackson Razorsharp Advantage Adjustable Anvil Secateurs £16.49

The smallest and lightest secateurs on test, these measure 18cm (7in) long and weigh just 145g (5oz), and retain their Best Small Anvil Secateurs title from 2012. Despite the plastic body, they are very robust and feature an SK5 upper cutting blade, which is PTFE coated for smoother cutting and rust resistance, and a plastic, grooved, serrated gripping anvil. The two-position locking switch provides cutting widths of 20mm and 12mm (¾in and ½in). The ergonomic soft-grip handles keep the secateurs comfortable even after extended periods of use.

Supplier: Spear & Jackson, 0114 281 4242, www.spear-and-jackson.com

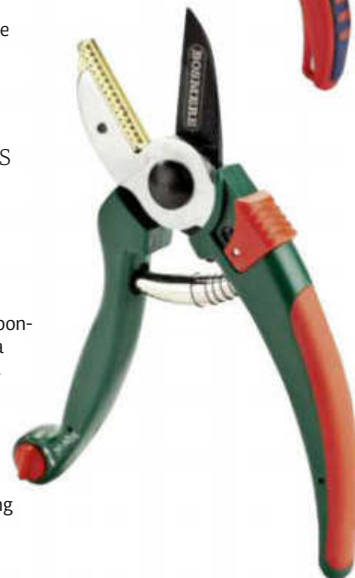


BEST VALUE ANVIL SECATEURS

Bosmere Anvil Secateurs with Wipe Oil £12.99

These feature lightweight, but robust, ergonomic plastic handles with comfortable soft grip, a high-grade carbon-steel blade with non-stick coating and a metal, grooved, serrated gripping anvil. They cut through all the wood types tested, but some force was needed for the thicker and denser woods. The oil wiper stored in the handle is very handy and a good visual reminder to clean and wipe the blades before putting them away. Cutting width 22mm (¾in).

Supplier: Bosmere, 01293 586200, www.bosmere.com





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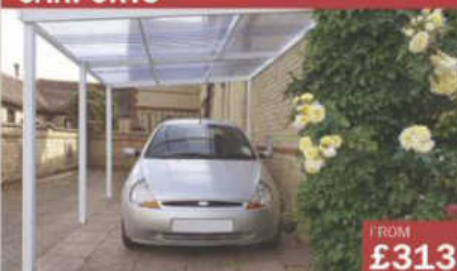
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CHRIS BEARDSHAW

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Award-winning garden designer, Chelsea Gold medallist, radio broadcaster and *Beechgrove Garden* presenter

Gain extra growing space using this easy technique



Perfecting sweet peas

For showstopping blooms, try cordon training

With their heady fragrance, carefree colour palette and butterfly blooms perched on scandent stems, sweet peas remain at the heart of the summer garden.

Native to southern Italy, they date back to the mid-1600s, when the relatively small blooms but rich fragrance attracted the attention of Sicilian monks.

Although selected and improved forms were cultivated

throughout the 18th century, it was thanks largely to a Scot residing in Shropshire, Henry Eckford, that the sweet pea wooed the horticultural world. Eckford not only vastly augmented the colour palette

but also developed the grandiflora strains, known for their showy petals and intoxicating scent.

The 'Prima Donna' variety spawned three types of offspring, each with uniquely wavy petals. One of these was reared at Althorp House, home to the Spencer Family, giving rise to the 'Countess Spencer' form. An array of Spencer hybrids went on to captivate a generation, and still perform well alongside modern forms.

A review of new sweet peas, from repeat-flowering, trailing 'Sugar 'n' Spice' to the opulent velvet shades of vigorous 2m (6ft 8in) climber 'Oxford & Cambridge', is planned for the forthcoming BBC *Beechgrove Garden* series. This ongoing review seeks out which varieties perform admirably at Beechgrove – some 3,500km (2,175 miles) north of the plants' ancestral home! New strains have the opportunity to prove themselves if they can withstand east-coast Scotland's shortened growing season, cooler temperatures and muted skies.

We're also considering the best training methods for cut-flower forms. A grower called Tom Jones developed the cordon training technique in the early 1900s, specifically to provide the finest quality flowers. Still valued today, this method might be more time consuming than allowing sweet peas to scramble, but it produces plentiful and sizeable show-quality blooms.

How to cordon train your plants

Buy plug plants, or start seedlings off now. Sow one seed per 7.5cm (2¾in) pot in a soil-based compost enriched with 50 per cent organic matter.

February sowings benefit from a little bottom heat, but remove from the propagator once germination occurs, to prevent leggy plants.

Once the plants have four leaves, pinch out the top pair. Place in a cold frame or cold glasshouse when they reach 10-15cm (4-6in) tall, hardening off slowly and taking precautions against pests.

Before planting out, enrich a trench with well-rotted manure and, after all frosts have passed, space out your plants 20-30cm (8-12in) apart in rows of the same spacing. Provide one cane adjacent to each plant. After six weeks, when plants have reached 30cm (12in) high, select the strongest shoot and pinch out all others. Tie this to the support with twine or metal plant rings. Nip out any side shoots emerging from

leaf axils and tendrils at the end of leaves.

Harvest stems as the blooms open – in the height of the season this can be more than one stem per plant per day. Once the plants reach the top of their supports, free each plant from its ties, lay it on the ground, then select a cane 1m (39in) or so from the original, and re-train the tip of the plant up this support. This offers another 1m of top growth space for the tip to continue producing blooms.

This process encourages not only the finest blooms but the longest harvest period, providing cut flowers right into autumn.



Tie the main shoot to a support cane

Pinch out the top pair once four leaves appear

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Are you a member of your local gardening club or horticultural society? Or are you your club's show secretary? If so, you'll welcome the news that GN's Top Tray is back for this year's shows. Make sure your club applies now for our show packs, which we're bringing to you in conjunction with our sponsor, leading seed company D.T. Brown.

Nationwide, veg gardeners treasure the Garden News Top Tray awards they've won at local shows and the prize vouchers the winners receive.

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We'll send you all the stationery you need and the prizes, so you can hold a successful Top Tray class. You can also print these forms from our website, www.gardennews magazine.co.uk

To avoid disappointment, get your application in as soon as possible. **The closing date is July 1, 2016.**



Previous winners enjoyed top prizes



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- Two copies of D.T. Brown catalogues.
- A set of Top Tray rules.

How to apply

Agree within the society to hold the Top Tray class. Send the completed application form, with your payment of £6.50, to: Garden News Top Tray Class, Media House, Lynch Wood, Peterborough PE2 6EA.

Cheques should be made payable to Garden News.

Entry form

TOP TRAY CLASS 2016

Our society would like to include the Top Tray class in its 2016 show. I have enclosed a cheque (made payable to Garden News) for £6.50 with this application.

SOCIETY NAME	<input type="text"/>	
TITLE OF SHOW	<input type="text"/>	
VENUE OF SHOW	<input type="text"/>	
DATE OF SHOW	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
NAME OF SHOW SECRETARY	<input type="text"/>	
EMAIL	<input type="text"/>	
ADDRESS	<input type="text"/>	
POSTCODE	<input type="text"/>	
TELEPHONE	<input type="text"/>	MOBILE <input type="text"/>

The closing date for applications is **Friday July 1, 2016**

☐ Please tick this box if you are applying for a society that has never taken part in Top Tray before.

DON'T FORGET TO ENCLOSE PAYMENT OF £6.50 WITH THIS APPLICATION FORM

Send to: Garden News Top Tray Class, Media House, Lynch Wood, Peterborough PE2 6EA.

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Winning veg will be uniform and blemish-free



Root prune an apple tree

Dig deep now to find these roots!

Where established apple trees consistently make new growth at the expense of fruit, you can root prune them. This will check the vigour of the tree and prompt it to set more flower and fruit. Essentially, you're tricking the tree into believing it's under threat, so it puts more of its energy into reproduction rather than growth.

Root pruning means digging a trench around the tree about 60cm-1.2m (2-4ft) away from the trunk, and carefully excavating the soil. Use a fork if there are lots of fibrous roots present, as these are the ones you want to leave undamaged. For

large trees, just tackle half the roots now and complete the job the following year.

You're looking for thick roots to prune.

If you find thin, fibrous roots as you dig, pull them up and back, out of the way, securing them on the ground behind with a stone or plank placed over them.

When you find thicker roots, 5cm (2in) in diameter or more, sever them with a pruning saw. Do this in several places along your trench. There's no need to treat the root with a wound sealant – the root will sprout new fibrous roots from the cut when it starts into active growth.

Replace some of the soil in the trench and re-lay any fibrous roots that you lifted up. Fill in the trench and tread it down firmly to create good contact between the soil and pruned roots.

Root prune apples while they're still dormant. You can also give established pear and nut trees the same treatment. If you want to root prune a cherry or plum, do it in spring when the risk of the tree getting silver-leaf disease is reduced.



Step by step



1 Dig a trench around half the tree. It only needs to be wide and deep enough to expose some thick roots. Don't dig more than you need to!



2 Saw through thick roots, severing them completely. Firm back the soil with your feet afterwards and re-lay any turf that you removed.

Last chance to harvest leeks

You're probably coming to the end of your supply of leeks that have been kept in the ground for the past few months until you've needed them. But late February is really the latest to be harvesting them. If you find you have a sudden glut that you've finally picked, pop them in an airtight bag for the freezer until you're ready to use them. Hopefully, you'll now have lots of space freed up to grow some other fruit and veg!



Sow aubergines in a propagator

Aubergines need a long growing season, so it's important to start them off now.

They love warmth and humid conditions. Growing them outdoors can lead to lacklustre fruits, especially if the summer is cool, so for the best results grow your aubergines in a greenhouse or growing frame.

Sow the seeds thinly in a tray of seed compost, or, as they are just big

enough to handle, sow two or three seeds to a small pot. This will reduce the need to prick out and pot on because you can simply pull out the weakest seedlings that germinate.

Cover the seed with a sprinkling of compost or Vermiculite, label them and water from below. Keep the seeds in a heated propagator at 21C (70F). Germination should take about 10 days.



Garden News RECOMMENDS

Three of the best varieties to start now



'Kermit'

Green and white Thai variety with a prolific set of small, round fruits. Ideal for baby veg. Available from Nicky's Nursery, tel: 01843 600972.



'Gretel'

A white variety that can be harvested when just a few inches long, making ideal baby fruits. Won't get tough as it gets longer. From Nicky's Nursery.



'Pinstripe'

This compact plant is ideal for container growing and produces cute, round, purple-and-white striped fruits. From Suttons Seeds, tel: 0844 326 2200.



Plant out and fleece hardy pea seedlings

You may have sown some hardy peas such as 'Meteor' indoors in the past few weeks. It's best to sow early indoors so you can prevent them rotting if there's excess winter wet, but also because of mice, who like to take advantage of the free food! Hardy peas can be planted out now, but to be on the safe side from frosts, cover them with fleece. Perhaps instead of in a bed, try growing them securely tied to your own homemade cane wigwam in a container full of rich, well-drained compost. It's a great way to grow them if you've got a small garden. You can direct sow peas from March, making sure seedlings are supported and watered thoroughly.

Protect peach leaves

It's time to take steps now to protect your peach from developing peach leaf curl. As the name suggests, this disease causes your plant's leaves to curl, distort and go brown-red in patches, and develop white fungal blooms. Some fungicides used to spray your peach tree for protection in autumn or February have been discontinued. Vitax Bordeaux Mixture and Bayer Garden Fruit and Vegetable Disease Control can no longer be used through most of the country, so dispose of any stocks of these and consider using a more environmentally-friendly control, such as a sheltered lean-to to keep the rain off. This will stop spores from germinating. A wooden screen fastened with plastic sheeting is a very effective solution.



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TERRY WALTON

Tales from the ALLOTMENT

Star of BBC Radio 2's *Jeremy Vine Show* and best-selling author. His allotment sits in the Rhondda Valley

Sowing carrots and beetroot

I'm stealing a march on greenhouse planting

With the ground soggy, outdoor activities have been curtailed, so I'm getting going on my greenhouse planting. I'm sowing carrot seeds in 5cm (2in) pots, which is breaking all the rules because carrots don't like root disturbance when they're growing. However, with careful timing, I usually get away with it.

I fill the pots with good multi-purpose compost and sprinkle three to four 'Eskimo' seeds on the surface, then sieve a layer of compost over the top. The pots are sprayed with tepid water and covered with a sheet of glass in a cool part of the greenhouse. When these have germinated and as soon as the true leaf has formed, I'll plant them out under an area that's being warmed with cloches. This will give my first young carrots in May.

Greenhouse-sown beetroot can also give an early crop and 'Boltardy' is a good choice. I sow three seeds per 5cm (2in) pot, spaced evenly, and treat them in the same way as the carrots. They will join them under the cloche once they've made a decent-sized seedling. I grow beetroot all season long for a succession of tasty, red roots.

Peppers take an age to give a return, and sowing now will supply tasty fruits in August and September. I'm growing a variety new to

Jobs to do now

- Repair path edges damaged by heavy rain.
- Empty containers that held last year's crop, ready for refilling.
- Harvest carrots from greenhouse containers.



Terry's a rule-breaker when it comes to sowing carrot seeds!

me called 'Mini Bell', which produces small sweet peppers that start green, turn orange, and then red. Hopefully, as it's a mini variety, I might be able to bring forward harvest time.

This time I fill a 10cm (4in) pot with good

Climbing the allotment ladder

To progress from those plots situated at the heady heights of our allotment, down to the greener pastures below, has always been by the principle of 'dead man's shoes'. Only when a member retired or left the plot was there an opportunity to move along. This is based on

Top of the plots – almost!



seniority, with everyone taking a step nearer the utopia of plot number one, just inside the gate, as time goes on. After more than 50 years, I've reached plot number two!

The plot-moving principle still exists in allotments today, but because many members have tailored their plots with a shed, greenhouse and raised beds, there's more reluctance to move now. Nearly every plot seems to have a custom-built shed and greenhouse, yet in my early days, there were just two buildings on the allotment: one housing lime – the only commodity sold to add to the soil at that time – and one just inside the main gates from where you could purchase seed crops.



'Mini Bell' pepper seeds are nurtured under cover

compost, sprinkle seeds on the surface and cover with a fine sprinkling of sieved compost. I water them lightly and place inside a polythene bag. They'll spend two days in my airing cupboard and are then placed on a warm windowsill until the seed leaves appear. Then they return to the warm greenhouse to make their first leaf before I prick them out into 7.5cm (3in) pots.

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MARTIN FISH

The undercover GARDENER

Former head gardener, TV & radio broadcaster & RHS judge

Jobs to do now



Getting my spuds started

For a head start with early potatoes, I'm potting some tubers into small pots of compost in the greenhouse. After a few weeks they can be planted out, or potted into large containers.



Cutting back for new growth

To encourage new growth on my shrubby salvias that have been overwintering in the greenhouse, I'm pruning old growth back and gradually giving the plants a little more water.

Sowing early perennials

I'm starting them off now for plenty of flowers this coming summer

I'll be sowing all sorts of seeds over the next few weeks, in both my greenhouse and my polytunnel, and it never fails to amaze me that from a tiny seed, a new plant grows.

Perennial flowers are one group I want to sow now, to give the plants a long growing season. Seed-grown perennials create a very cost-effective new border and many types will flower this summer if sown early in

the year. I'm planning to grow achillea, penstemon, echinacea, aquilegia and delphinium.

Good hygiene is really important when seed sowing and should be practised at all times. Use fresh compost and clean seed trays or pots to reduce the risk of fungal diseases that can easily damage tiny seedlings.

I tend to sow the seed evenly in small pots of multi-purpose compost, and if the

seeds need covering, I use a thin layer of fine Vermiculite that keeps them moist and cosy while they germinate. Remember to label the pots!

In order to germinate seeds in cold weather, you'll need to provide some gentle heat, and a propagator's ideal for this job. Once the seedlings are through and pricked out, they can be grown on in a cool greenhouse during spring.



Photos: Martin Fish



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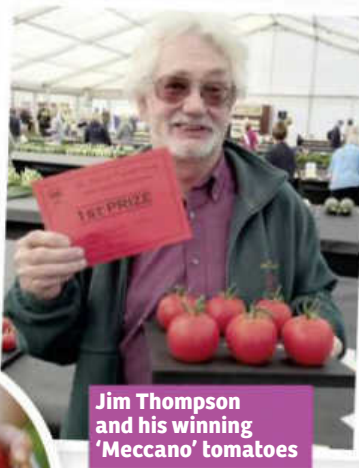
Show-worthy tomatoes

My tried-and-tested methods and pick of the varieties for the showbench

It's time to think about sowing tomatoes now, especially if you're planning to stage at shows in August and September. There's a bewildering range of different varieties available to gardeners, including heirloom types, modern hybrids and vine-ripe tomatoes. In my seed catalogue, we offer 14 varieties that have been selected for their

showing merits, together with excellent eating qualities.

In a warm greenhouse or sunny conservatory, seeds can be sown now. However, leave sowing them in a cold greenhouse until mid-March. When temperatures are low, growth is very slow and a drop in temperature can result in a bluey tinge to the foliage, from



Jim Thompson and his winning 'Meccano' tomatoes

Photos: Medwyn Williams

Fine or Superfine grade Vermiculite. It's a very lightweight material, so always soak the seed tray from the bottom until the compost and Vermiculite are fully charged with water. If you water from the top you risk the Vermiculite and seed flooding over the side of the tray.

This year, I'll be sowing medium-sized 'Zenith' and 'Meccano', small-fruited 'Sweet Aperitif' and, for its sheer size, 'Gigantomo'. 'Meccano' did very well for several growers last year, including Jim Thompson, who won the Midland Branch Championships tomato class at Malvern, and I've heard some fabulous comments about 'Sweet Aperitif' from the breeder.

'Gigantomo' tomatoes can be entered for the Harrogate Autumn Show heaviest tomato competition in September. Sponsors Thompson & Morgan are offering £1000 first prize, £300 second, £150 third and £50 fourth. If you'd like to have a go at growing 'Gigantomo', I sell this variety. Visit www.medwyns.co.uk.

which the plants take some weeks to recover.

In my greenhouse, I use a horticultural electric blanket rather than a propagator. It measures about 60cm (2ft) wide and 1.8m (6ft) long, and sits on top of an inch-thick polystyrene sheet, with a further top cover of polythene. I have mine set at 21C (70F), which is ideal for most vegetable seed.

Evenly space the seed on top of fine Levington F1 or Levington F2S seed compost. Don't compact the compost too hard because the emerging roots need air around them to grow well. Cover with



Gigantomo – you can see where it gets its name!

Gardening with the **EXPERTS**

The world's finest share their tips for success

The Italian
Dolomites in June

Kabschia saxifraga
growing in a
crevice bed

Flowery cushions of spring

Early-flowering porophylla saxifraga enliven dull, chilly days

During the last bleak weeks of winter and early spring, some of the first alpinists to flower are a group of cushion-forming saxifraga called porophylla or kabschia. They are justifiably popular due to their neat habit, hardiness, ease of culture and simply gorgeous flowers to brighten cold, dull days.

Their delicate appearance belies their hardiness - porophylla saxifraga are well adapted to tough conditions in the wild, including sub-zero temperatures, biting winds, ice, running water, sunshine and drought. They generally inhabit rocky mountainsides on cliffs, and grow among scree or boulders where moisture quickly drains away, often with their roots in nothing more than grit and a little humus.

Armed with this information, it helps us provide the correct care for these beautiful early-spring alpinists.

Best position

Two places to avoid are deep shade and spots liable to drying out during summer. Containers are excellent, particularly for smaller varieties where several can be planted together and raised up for easier viewing.



Michael Mitchell

Michael and his wife Allison own Slack Top Alpine Nursery, situated 282m (925ft) above sea level on a north-facing slope in the Yorkshire Pennines. They have won nine gold medals since they started exhibiting at major shows in 2006. Michael is the author of *Alpines – An Essential Guide* and has raised many new varieties over 30 years.

Some types are vigorous enough for rockeries, or you could cultivate them in outdoor containers or in a cold greenhouse or porch where the earliest blooms can be admired in comfort. A fun way to grow a

collection is in a crevice garden, which involves planting between vertical slices of rock (see page 12, to create your own). This helps provide excellent drainage, plus the plants really enjoy having their roots in close proximity to the rock. Alternatively, some growers plant their porophylla direct into a porous rock called tufa.

Compost

Like many alpinists, porophylla saxifraga do best in very gritty soil. If growing them outdoors, mix an equal volume of grit or sharp sand with alpine compost. Do not use multi-purpose compost for alpinists. For containers, mix equal parts by volume of John Innes No 1 and grit. Don't give extra food because it will lead to uncharacteristic growth and a loss of hardiness.

Care calendar

Spring: Early spring is the time to enjoy the flowers, but make sure plants aren't covered and don't dry out. Also, remove spent flowers to prevent mould, and provide lots of ventilation. New growth will begin after flowering



Saxifraga
'Harlow Carr'



Saxifraga
'Gloria'

Michael's pick

There are lots of varieties to try, but they don't all grow at the same rate. For example, one two-year-old plant of *Saxifraga grisebachii* might reach 5cm (2in) across, whereas a vigorous variety might be 12-15cm (5-6in) at the same age. Growth habit varies too, with some forming a tight dome of tiny leaves while others can be spiny.



Saxifraga
'Crinoline'



Saxifraga
'Cranborne'



Saxifraga
'Meteor'

Slow growers

- **'Crinoline':** Very dense dome, tiny leaves, pale pink flowers, dark stems.
- ***S. grisebachii*:** Stiff, rounded grey rosettes.
- **'Shepherd's Crook':** Reddish flowers. Hates soggy conditions.
- **'John Tomlinson':** Very dense, spiky dome. Neat red stems with white flowers.
- **'Walter Irving':** Very compact, spiny dome. Palest pink flowers.

Slow-medium

- **'Harlow Carr':** Flat green mat. Stemless, deep rose flowers.
- **'James':** Compact cushion. Reddish buds opening to bright yellow flowers.
- **'Tysoe Splendour':** Dense green dome. Stemless pink flowers with crinkly petals.

Medium

- **'Cranborne':** Grey-green, low cushion. Stemless pink flowers.
- **'Gloria':** Tight, spiny-leaved dome. Large, white, red-stemmed flowers.

More vigorous

- **'Meteor':** Spiny green mat, bright yellow flowers.

and it's a good time to take cuttings. Visit nurseries to choose plants in flower.

Summer: Keep plants in pots well-watered and provide light shade from hot sun. Remember to keep cuttings shaded. Continue planting and re-pot as required.

Autumn: Divide and replant large plants and finish planting out. Take cuttings for overwintering in a cold frame or the greenhouse. Remove any growth infected with mould (botrytis) and maintain greenhouse ventilation.

Winter: Provide overhead protection from rain for any autumn plantings. Earliest flowers can appear in February, so marvel at the attractive cushions and developing buds!

● *Alpines - An Essential Guide* by Michael Mitchell costs £16.95 (plus £4.80 postage) from Slack Top Alpine Nursery & Garden, tel: 01422 845348; www.slacktopnurseries.co.uk



Sprouting
tubers ready
to pot up

Time to get growing

Tubers can be planted in propagators now

It's time to start begonia tubers into growth. Provided you have a heated propagator or warm windowsill and somewhere frost-free to grow on plants, tubers can be planted from now until mid-March if you're flowering them in a greenhouse or conservatory.

However, if you're growing them in beds, outdoor tubs or hanging baskets, wait until late March or early April, or they could grow too large and need planting out before the risk of frost has passed.

● **When:** Plant tubers when they have small growth buds or pips on the concave (hollow) side. If they don't, as long as they're firm and showing no signs of rot, place them, concave side down, in a warm propagator to start them off.

● **How:** Start tubers in pots or a deep seed tray, filled with 2.5cm (1in) quality peat compost with 25 per cent Perlite or Vermiculite added to improve drainage. Leave a 5cm (2in) gap between tubers in trays, or choose a pot size that leaves the same space around



Tubers don't
all shoot at
the same time



Jobs to do now

- As foliage begonias show signs of new growth, move to a pot just one size larger. Half pots are ideal because their shallow roots don't like too-deep compost.
- If your greenhouse shading has been washed off, replace with a thin layer and top up as sun intensity increases.

Alan Harris



Alan started growing begonias in 1975 after a visit to the Chelsea Flower Show. He was secretary of the National Begonia Society for 12 years until 2013 and specialises in cut blooms, which he shows at Spalding each year.

the tuber. Place tuber, concave side up, and cover with compost until the top is about 1cm (½in) below the surface. Begonia tubers root over the whole surface and it's important to cover them completely.

● **Watering:** Keep compost moist enough to encourage roots to form but not saturated, which will cause rotting. I water my compost a few days before planting and keep it in a warm place, then the tubers can be planted without further watering.

● **Heat:** Cover with fleece, not polythene, which causes condensation and can lead to rot, and keep between 18-20C (64-68F).

● **Ongoing care:** Check compost regularly to see if it needs watering. Insert a finger between and beneath tubers to make sure it hasn't dried out around the roots. About once a week (more regularly as roots form), water from the top using tepid water, and allow to drain before replacing on the warmth.

● **Shoots:** After a few weeks, shoots should break through the compost. Timing will differ between tubers, so don't try scraping away compost to check, as you could damage emerging shoots. Remove fleece during the day to allow maximum light to the shooting plants and dry any condensation. However, don't place your begonias in full sun, because bright sunshine through glass can burn delicate foliage, even this early in the year.



Begonia
'George
McCormick' in
the glasshouse



TONY DICKERSON

The Problem SOLVER

Royal Horticultural Society gardening advisor and podcaster

What's the right small tree for me?

Q I'm looking for some small upright trees up to about 3m (10ft) high to provide a focal point. Would cypress or juniper conifers fit the bill?

Margaret Warrington, West Central Scotland

A Columnar conifers are great as accent plants, drawing the eye to a particular part of the garden. The narrowest are selections of *Cupressus sempervirens*, the Italian or Mediterranean cypress, but they're not reliably hardy in colder parts of the UK.

The most reliable and narrow substitutes in colder areas are selections of *Juniperus communis*, such as 'Sentinel', or *J. scopulorum*, such as 'Skyrocket'. However, unless you buy them as semi-mature specimens they will take an age to reach 3m (10ft).

A quicker option would be selections of Lawson's cypress, *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*, such as 'Grayswood Pillar' and 'Kilworth Column'.



An attractive treescape of conifers needn't loom large

Photos: Shutterstock, unless stated

Garden News RECOMMENDS

Focal-point conifers



Juniper

Prefers well-drained soil. Fully hardy, glaucous foliage and blue berries. Height: 2m (6½ft), spread: 50cm (20in).



Abies koreana

Blue or purple cones on young trees. Choose a compact one such as 'Silberlocke'. Height: 4m (13ft), spread: 1.5m (5ft).



Chamaecyparis

Columnar evergreens with dense foliage and small cones. Height: 4m (13ft), spread: 1.5m (5ft).



The right type of compost makes all the difference

Q What compost is best for growing cyclamen? I used to grow them well, but struggle with what's available now.

Ann Prosser, Stoke on Trent

A Sadly, most peat-free and peat-reduced composts often contain processed green waste and have high pH and mineral salts content. A peat-free exception

is Sylvagrow, a mix used by professional nurseries, based on composted bark, wood fibre and coir. It's as close as you'll get to the peat and bark mixes specifically formulated for commercial growers of cyclamen.

Among the peat-reduced versions that are available, try B&Q's Verve Multipurpose Peat-free Compost or Levington's Original Multipurpose Compost. You could add some leaf mould together with 20 per cent by

volume of sharp sand or grit.

With any new compost mix, it's crucial to get the watering right. To start with, be cautious about overwatering and saturating the mix. This is best assessed by lifting the pot. You should know immediately from its weight if it's drying out.



Don't over-water newly-potted plants

Q There are masses of grubs under planks we use to cross our waterlogged lawn. Are they friend or foe?
Kamila Aigras, Galway, Ireland

A The small grubs are bibionid fly larvae, which feed on decaying organic matter and are often found in large numbers under piles of leaf litter and other rotting vegetation.

A common species for this situation is St Mark's fly, *Bibio marci*. The adult flies are black insects, approximately 1cm (½in) long, and can be numerous in late spring to early summer, when they fly slowly in grassy



An adult St Mark's fly

places. Other species are 5-7mm (¼in) long and have reddish brown legs and/or abdomens. They cause no damage to plants and don't bite, so no control measures are required, but you may need to think about drainage for your lawn!

Best toms for taste?

Q Which are the best tomatoes to grow for taste?
Ian Byrnes, Anerley, London

A For small flavoursome tomatoes, 'Gardener's Delight' AGM is reliable and heavy-cropping, with an excellent old-fashioned flavour. For standard-size tomatoes, 'Outdoor Girl' AGM is heavy cropping and early fruiting.

For a flavoursome beefsteak tomato, consider 'Costoluto Fiorentino', AGM with brightly-coloured, ribbed fruits, or dark maroon 'Black Russian'. If you like very sweet cherry tomatoes, try yellow 'Sun Baby' AGM.

Flavour is a complicated thing and very personal. In tomatoes, the balance between sugars and acids determines flavour but, in turn, it's influenced by the weather. Feeding and watering will also affect flavour. For the best flavour, feed weekly and provide adequate water to sustain the plant but without it being permanently saturated.



'Gardener's Delight' are good for yield and taste

Q Which British native trees would suit waterlogged soils and are also attractive to wildlife?
Judy Larkin, Norfolk

A Very few native trees tolerate waterlogged soils for long, with the exception of alders, poplars, willows. Black poplar (*Populus nigra*) is a rare British native that could be more widely grown if you have an enormous garden.

For wet soils the list can be extended to include birch, hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*), pear (*Pyrus communis*) and mountain ash. Unfortunately, no native broadleaved evergreen trees will tolerate wet soils, although our native Scot's pine is one conifer that will.

Willows and birches support a

lot of insect life that many birds feed on, while the flowers of hawthorn, pear and mountain ash are important sources of nectar and, in autumn, give rise to berries and fruit.



Nectar-rich hawthorn flowers

Quick Questions

Do I need to feed my winter pansies in containers? They're flowering well.

Nicola Clarke, by email

The mild winter in many areas has given excellent displays. You don't want to encourage sappy leaf growth, so use a high-potassium tomato feed every couple of weeks. Deadhead regularly to encourage further blooms.



Feeding will help your pansies thrive

Do I need to sow and grow cucumbers in ericaceous compost?

Paul Britton, Wednesfield, Wolverhampton

Cucumbers will grow happily in a range of pH, from acid to alkaline, and are fine sown and grown in ordinary seed and potting composts. Similarly, parsley, raspberries and potatoes will all grow happily on slightly alkaline soil. Blueberries, however, must have distinctly acid conditions.

My sweet peas are over a foot high. Can I plant them out now and in the same spot as last year?

Mr D Foreman, by email

I'd pinch them back quite hard and apply a weak liquid feed to produce bushy small plants for planting out later in spring. We could still have some very hard weather. Enthusiasts often have specially prepared beds for their sweet peas and grow them year after year in the same spot.

Would slugs have eaten through the stems on my broad beans on the allotment?

Sam Dawling, Northampton

Visit on a wet evening with a torch to assess the gastropod threat. However, I think the culprits are probably field voles or field mice, because rodents take great pleasure in simply 'felling' broad beans by eating through the stem. You could use a humane trap or simply sow a few extra to fill in gaps.

Should I worry about some dead branches towards the tips of my potted Japanese maple?

John Bryant, Canterbury

Japanese maples usually do this. Whether it's thin branches caught by the cold or the result of drying out in a pot, it's not serious. Simply snip them off with secateurs but don't cut back too far into living stems because they will bleed sap.



Write to Your Questions

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Readers' gardens now!

Over the FENCE

Last, but not least: crocuses flowered after daffs this year



Photos: Joanna Daniels



Deep blue *iris reticulata* are always welcome

Spring's in reverse!



Joanna Daniels

A family garden in Astley Burf, Worcestershire, with recently developed beds and borders.

We're still being battered by gales and heavy rain. The ground is saturated, so I'm unable to start digging the vegetable plot, although I have managed to weed the strawberry bed.

I'm pleased to see the rhubarb I moved last autumn is coming into growth. I've planted garlic cloves into modules to start them off and we have potatoes in trays to chit. This year we are growing 'Charlotte' and 'Lady Christl', which is a new variety for us.

Spring bulbs are flowering in reverse order this year. The daffodils have been blooming for weeks, followed by snowdrops, and now at last the crocus are coming through! We could do with some sunshine to open their flowers.

Deep blue *Iris reticulata* are flowering in the front garden and this year I've grown some in pots too, which are brightening up the greenhouse. A pretty single-flowered camellia is also blooming and more hellebores come into flower daily.

Seeds from the Hardy Plant



Single camellia flowers add a splash of bright pink

Society seed exchange have arrived and I'm getting pots and trays washed in readiness for sowing. I'm keen to get started, but I've learned from past disappointments that it's better to wait until light levels improve.

We've put up new trellis panels for the rambling roses. They'd got completely overgrown over the last few years so we have cut them hard back and tied the remaining stems into the new supports.

We love watching all the



Autumn-planted rhubarb is well ahead

wildlife that is attracted to our garden, although some is more welcome than others. We've enjoyed seeing flocks of small birds at the feeders, but it was a rare treat to watch a badger mooching in the lane just outside the garden, although he didn't actually come in.

Visual treat perennials and bulbs



Tom Pattinson

A garden full of unusual plants and a big collection of fruit and vegetables in Alnwick, Northumberland.

There are cheerful signs that spring and more settled weather is on the way. Groups of dwarf bulbs and brave early herbaceous perennials have burst into bloom, joining colourful winter shrubs.

We have assorted attractive evergreens, but the eleagnus and aucuba 'Crotonifolia' have stood out from the others. Groups of snowdrop, and dwarf narcissi 'Minnow' are also catching the eye and I can't resist the clusters of blue *Iris reticulata*.

Last week, I gave the mower its first airing of the year and cutting the lawn caused a reaction among the local bird population. An owl has taken to a nearby sycamore



A new hellebore opens up daily



Bright birch and cornus stems and witch hazel flowers make a pretty late-winter scene

from



Early bulbs are going strong



Erica 'Springwood White'



Eleagnus and aucuba stand out with their golden variegation



Four-seasons lemon lives up to its name



we will start depositing pockets of natural nesting material in different parts of the garden - hair saved from grooming the horses is popular with the finches.

The cold greenhouse peach has plump flower buds so we'll be pollinating it with a small brush in a week or so. There's some bud development on the vines too. Apart from one overnight frost there has been no need to use fleece on any of the plants.

Plants in the conservatory are ticking over nicely. I'm pleased that the red hot chilli pepper 'Bhut Jolokia' is surviving a third winter, and a citrus 'Gareys Eureka', also known as the four-seasons lemon, has substantial fruits, one of which we used on pancake day!


tree and hooting starts at 3.30am every morning. A song-thrush has started warbling at 6.45am, then several other birds join in. Not a full-blown dawn chorus yet, but enough to raise our hopes.

We planned this garden with birds in mind and they have responded positively. Next week


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'Strawberries and cream'
(Light fragranced patio). This is a very unusual patio rose of pink and cream. It makes an eye-catching display in the garden, or on its own in a tub. Height 45-60cm.



'Cliff Richard'

Introduced to celebrate Cliff's 50th birthday during the 1980s, this enduringly popular floribunda rose is magnificent. Repeat flowering, its shell pink petals have a hint of silver on the reverse and it has one of the nicest fragrances you'll come across. Height 90cm-1.2m (3-4ft)

'Peace'

Lemon yellow, edged with pink. Free flowering very vigorous and bushy growth with large glossy dark green foliage, which makes it extremely disease resistant.



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JO WRIGHT
Pick of the POST
 With the editor of Garden News



DIY triumph.

Well done to Melvyn Griffiths from Anglesey (January 30)! What a fantastic wheelbarrow he has made. I was left with a lot of pallets and slate battens when we had our roof done, and I decided to put them to good use. I made pelargonium boxes from the pallets and troughs from the

battens, with a good sanding and a coat of varnish. Maybe I'll make a wheelbarrow next!

Allan Grose, Preston

Jo says: Love the planters, Allan! What a handy lot GN readers are. Like you, I can never throw anything away and always try to find a good use for something.

Fruit platter's just the job for seeds!

I've enjoyed your recent suggestions on recycling. Last week as I purchased a supermarket fresh fruit platter, I couldn't help noticing how it seemed perfect for growing small numbers of different seeds. I've punched

some drainage holes in the bottom and made labels by cutting up pieces of a margarine tub. How very satisfying!

Sharon Pomeroy, Chester

Jo says: Great idea! I can't wait to try it myself and grow a few different types of herbs.

STAR PRIZE



Sharon wins a £25 voucher from Mr Fothergill's for use in its mail-order catalogue for 2016, out now! It's packed with a huge choice of quality seeds and exciting flower, fruit and veg plants.



Earning a free meal

I thought you might like to see an acrobatic woodpigeon having a free meal in my garden after Storm Henry blew the top off the bird feeder!

W. G Westcott, Coylton

Jo says: It looks like he (or she?) has been practising for the Rio Olympics in August!



Beautiful amaryllis

My amaryllis has three stems, each with five buds. It's quite a stunner!

Mrs D Danby, Stoke-on-Trent

Jo says: What a beauty! Many thanks to all of you that sent in amaryllis photos - more next week!



Orchid pot greenhouse

I've just been in the cold greenhouse, putting in some seeds, and found that an upside-down clear orchid pot makes a marvellous mini greenhouse for pots of early seeds.

Wendy Wilks, Oxford

Jo says: Good idea Wendy, and it saves on all those little plastic bags.

Tweets & Posts



Thanks @GardenNewsMag for this weeks' free #seed. Sown. Will look forward to the blooms! #grow #gyo #GardenNewsMag
Debi Holland, Twitter



I enjoyed seeing so many different snowdrops at Wisley
Brendan Byrne, Twitter



'Kelvedon Wonder' peas, sown this morning, to be raised in the greenhouse.
Steve Lang, Twitter



Write to

Jo-Anne Wright,
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Paul Hansford
Horticultural
Director

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I believe this is our best Busy Lizzie yet. New Guinea 'Divine' boasts a resilient nature resistant to both the British weather as well as mildew. This is the ideal new variety to create breathtaking displays throughout your garden; brighten beds or create mesmerising features with hanging baskets and patio pots. I am so confident that you will not be disappointed that I will give you double your money back if you don't believe this is the best busy lizzie yet. To increase your flower power use our exclusive Incredibloom® fertiliser and you could enjoy up to 400% more blooms!

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No
8

PRIZE CROSSWORD

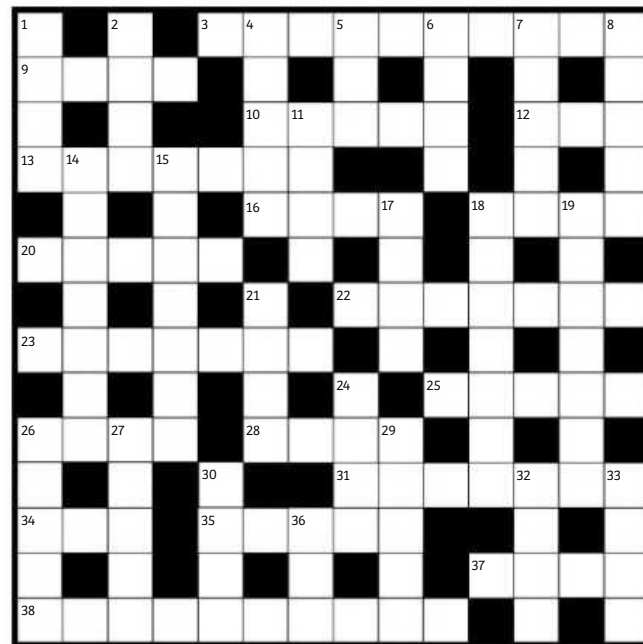
Letters in odd-numbered squares from 9 to 37 spell out the botanical name of a vegetable, whose common name can be found formed by two consecutive DOWN clues.

ACROSS

- 3 Botanical name for the daisy family (10)
9 Fruit with 'Comice' and 'Conference' varieties (4)
10 ___ Gras, carnival (5)
12 Atmosphere, or tune (3)
13 'Plough the fields and ____.' (7)
16 Asian woman's garment (4)
18 Hollow, jointed stem of a tall grass (4)
20 Blackish timber from a tropical tree (5)
22 Lavish meal, or puncture (7)
23 Canadian city famous for its annual 'Stampede' rodeo (7)
25 Sudden anxious awareness (5)
26 Destructive insect (4)
28 *Sorbus* ____, the whitebeam (4)
31 Orchestral kettle drums (7)
34 Number (3)
35 Grape-bearing plants (5)
37 Italian sparkling wine (4)
38 Second-largest USA city (3,7)

DOWN

- 1 Large primates (4)
2 Variety name meaning dwarf (4)
4 Great and Little ___ Head, headlands flanking the seaside resort of Llandudno (5)
5 Standard golf score (3)
6 Cut with small quick strokes (4)
7 Jewelled headdress (5)
8 'Mrs C. W. ____, award-winning



- variety of helianthemum (5)
11 Thoroughbred horse originating from SE Asia (4)
14 Leaf veg of brassica family (7)
15 Later today (7)
17 Not working, or work-shy (4)
18 Primula with clusters of drooping yellow flowers (7)
19 Uncharged atomic particle (7)
21 Locality, region (4)
24 Minute arachnid (4)
26 Part of a flower head (5)
27 Fruits of the blackthorn (5)
29 Passage between seats (5)
30 Name of several English rivers (4)

SOLUTION TO No 6

Across 5 Eagle 8 Armchair 9 Abies
10 Rose 11 Dense 12 Dew 15 Virginia
18 Ouse 20 Fuji 21 Hathaway 22 Lea
27 Eight 28 Anne 30 Aztec 31 Amethyst
32 Tower
Down 1 Trio 2 Screw 3 Hardy 4 Frankie
5 Elaeagnus 6 Grin 7 Easy 10 Radish
13 Wort 14 Estate car 16 Nail 17 Aerate
19 Vaughan 23 Ether 24 Maths 25 Dart
26 Stew 29 Nosy
Hidden No 1 hit The Garden of Eden
The winner of crossword No 6 is Jean Lake, of Burford, Oxon.

- 32 As well (4)
33 Name of the Greek goddess of the rainbow (4)
36 French for 'born' (3)

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Watch your
garden grow!



Making
something
special

Home GROWN

Forced rhubarb

It's the first home-grown crop of the year

As there is virtually no fresh fruit to harvest in the UK at the beginning of the year, rhubarb forcing is a long established tradition. Wakefield in West Yorkshire is the rhubarb capital of the UK. There, the crop is grown undercover in vast sheds, and stems are picked by candlelight!

Though rhubarb is viewed as a fruit, it is actually a vegetable stalk, with poisonous leaves that should be discarded.

To force, it first needs to be exposed to cold to overcome dormancy. Depending where in the country you live, once you've had a good cold snap, cover the crowns with a pot, excluding all light. The tender pink stalks will be ready to pull in around eight weeks, when

they measure 20-30cm (8-12in).

As forcing weakens the crown, only force established plants, and leave to rest in alternate years. For a supply each year, you may like to have a few crowns on the go that you can rotate. Gently pull the stalks from the ground, don't cut them as a stump will be left and will rot. In colder regions, insulate the exterior of the pot with straw or bubble wrap.

Early varieties that are good for forcing include 'Victoria', 'Stockbridge Arrow', 'Timperley Early' and 'Early Champagne'.

Here are our favourite recipes to make the most of your early harvest!

A large pot
is used to cover
the crown



Compote is
quick and
easy to make

Rhubarb Compote

Perfect for rhubarb fool or to top yoghurt or breakfast cereal.

Ingredients

400g (14oz) forced rhubarb
4 tablespoons golden caster sugar
4 tablespoons fresh orange juice
3 teaspoons pomegranate juice (optional)

Method

1 Combine ingredients and, over a medium heat, cook in a single layer in a wide pan until just

bubbling. Turn heat down to low and cook gently for a few minutes more, until tender. Check constantly. Allow to cool.

2 Sieve the cooled rhubarb over a bowl and leave to strain.

3 Once half a small glassful of juice has collected, transfer compote to a covered jar and refrigerate. It will keep for several days.

TIP

Add leftover compote juice to gravies and casseroles, or drink with equal parts of orange juice or sparkling mineral water.

Rhubarb Fool

Ingredients

Double or whipping cream
Greek yoghurt
1tsp vanilla extract
Icing sugar, sieved, to taste
Rhubarb compote (see above)
Pink shimmer sugar (optional)

Method

1 Fold together equal quantities of softly whipped cream and Greek yoghurt. Add vanilla extract and icing sugar, to taste.
2 Setting some aside for topping, fold mixture through an equal quantity of compote.
3 Top with reserved cream mixture and finish with pink shimmer sugar.



If you don't have
pink shimmer
sugar, use chopped
rhubarb sprinkles



Neil Heworth

Rhubarb Sprinkles

These 'soft-eating' sprinkles, pretty and dainty as rose petals, taste gorgeously tangy. Choose the pinkest, thickest stalks you can.

Ingredients

1-2 sticks forced rhubarb

1-2 teaspoons golden caster sugar

You will need: a wire rack, covered with a sheet of greaseproof paper, on top of a baking tray

Method

1 Preheat oven to lowest setting. Slice the rhubarb as thinly as possible with a sharp, non-serrated knife. Toss in the sugar and spread out rhubarb on the prepared tray.

2 Bake for 35-45 minutes, checking frequently. Once rhubarb begins to shrink and curl slightly, turn off the heat. Leave the rhubarb in the oven to cool slowly, with the door ajar. Rhubarb goes beautifully with pork, and the sprinkles add an elegant new dimension to sausage and mash.

● For more recipes and gardening, visit: www.mrssimkins.co.uk



Sue Simkins

Different varieties of rhubarb have different coloured stalks, varying from red to green



TIP

The gingerbread is also delicious un-iced, eaten warm as a pudding with cream or custard.

Rhubarb Gingerbread with Rhubarb Sprinkles

Rhubarb and ginger are such perfect partners. Makes 16 squares

Ingredients

3 sticks of forced rhubarb, washed but not dried, cut into 3cm (1in) lengths

2-3 teaspoons golden caster sugar

110g (4oz) salted butter, diced

50g (1¾oz) soft dark brown sugar

2 tablespoons black treacle

4 tablespoons golden syrup

2 level teaspoons cream of tartar

1 level teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

2 teaspoons mixed spice

3 teaspoons ground ginger

225g (8oz) plain flour

2 medium eggs, beaten

Lemon icing (see recipe, below right)

and rhubarb sprinkles (see top), to finish

You will need: a greased 20cm (8in) square oven-proof glass baking dish (or brownie tin), lined with greaseproof paper

Method

1 Preheat oven to gas mark 4/180C (160 in a fan oven). Sprinkle rhubarb with caster sugar and mix thoroughly to coat. Arrange in a single layer in the baking dish. Bake for approximately 10 minutes until just tender. Set aside.

2 Melt butter, dark brown sugar, treacle and syrup in a large pan. Cool slightly. Add raising agents and spices to flour and sieve half gradually over the mixture, whisking constantly.

3 Sieve a little more flour over the top and add eggs, still whisking constantly. Whisk in remaining flour and continue beating until smooth and glossy.

4 Drain away surplus juice from the prepared rhubarb. Pour gingerbread batter over rhubarb and bake for 30-40 minutes until springy to the touch and a skewer inserted comes out virtually clean. Leave to cool in tin.

5 Once cold, carefully loosen edges from baking dish and invert gingerbread onto a board. Invert again, right way up, onto a serving plate.

11 Drizzle with diagonal lines of icing and scatter with rhubarb sprinkles. Mark into squares.

Lemon Icing

Ingredients

175g (6oz) sieved icing sugar

2½ tablespoons lemon juice

1 teaspoon glycerine

Method

Tip icing sugar into the clean, dry processor bowl and add juice and glycerine. Whiz until smooth.



Next week: Mother's Day spring garden gift

Free* agapanthus for every reader

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Agapanthus produce many showy flowers per stem, and their strap-like leaves are an added attraction. They grow to 75cm (30in) high in summer and are ideal for a border or patio pot. They love humus-rich, well-drained soil. To receive one bare-root of **'Jolanda'** (pictured), with medium blue flowers, just send £3.95 to cover postage costs, or get it free when you order our agapanthus collection, which comprises one bare-root each of ● **'Intermedia Blue'** dark blue, 30 flowers per stem ● **'Stockholm'** pale blue ● **'Polar Ice'** large pure white flowers. **Our offer price is £12.95, saving nearly £5.** Delivery from late March. Offer closes March 26.



Primulina collection

Primulina are a diverse group of Asiatic gesneriads native to the Himalayas and south-east Asia. Flowering over several months, the bell-shaped flowers are held above a rosette of foliage. Grow in similar conditions to streptocarpus. Our collection consists of 5 varieties ● **'Aiko'** yellow, pale green leaves ● **'Candy'** soft pink, narrow leaves ● **'Diane Marie'** lavender-blue, silver-green leaves ● **'Erika'** lilac, orange bars ● **'Tamiana'** miniature white.

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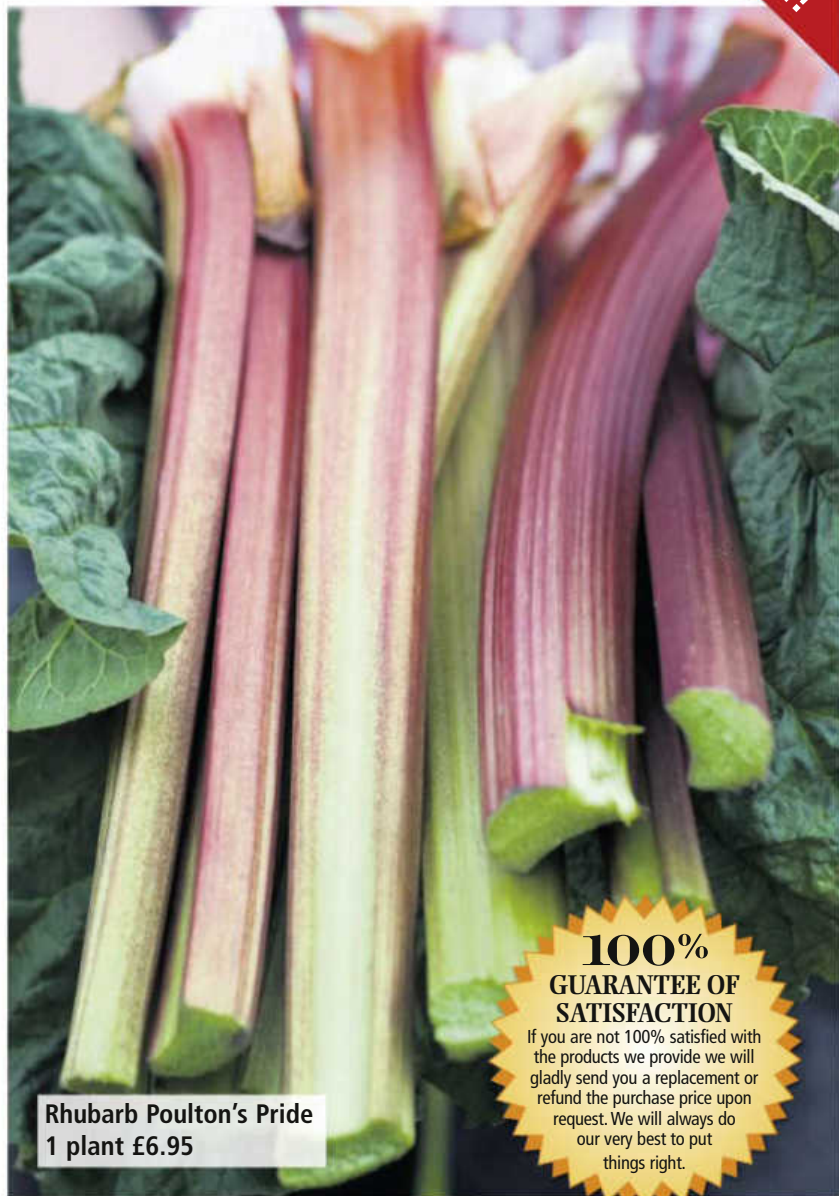
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Gardening **GENIUS**

Nuggets of pure wisdom

There's still just time to take cuttings of all your favourite deciduous hardwood climbers, shrubs and trees before they strike up into growth again, but how can we make sure we get it right? Here, the GN team and Andy Stevens, head gardener of Borde Hill in West Sussex, give us some timely advice.

1 I inherited a few old blackcurrant bushes with a superior flavour but small fruits. Wanting more of these bushes but not knowing the variety, I took some hardwood cuttings in late winter and pushed the cuttings into a slit in the ground in my nursery bed. The following spring they had big fat buds and had all taken. Each summer, I spend hour upon hour picking these tiny berries but, for their flavour, they're certainly worth it!

Jo Wright, editor

2 Try an easy-rooting deciduous shrub to try the method out, such as spiraea, willow or weigela, as there's more chance of seeing the fruits of your success. You can speed up the rooting process if you fleece your cuttings, or if it's particularly cold still or you live in a less mild area of the country, you can put them in a coldframe or indoors, out of frost's way.

Karen Murphy, features editor

3 When rooting in a pot, only use the outside edge. Save compost by placing a smaller pot in the middle and filling compost in between the two. The one in the middle then acts as a handy watering hole!

Most people don't know that figs are one of the easiest plants to propagate from hardwood cuttings. Take them in late winter or early spring, before bud break. Choose a stem with a growing point intact to take your cutting from. Trim the cutting to 20cm (8in) long, scrape a strip of bark off the bottom to expose more cambium, and dip it in rooting powder. Plunge into a pot of gritty compost and keep moist in a cool greenhouse. They only take a few weeks to root.

Melissa Mabbitt, garden writer

The final cut

4 Propagate conifers such as juniper through hardwood cuttings. Take 10-12.5cm (4-5in) long tips in February and include some woody growth from the previous season. Pull off the lower growth to leave 5cm (2in) of stem, and place cuttings

in a pot filled with a mix of peat, horticultural sand and Perlite. Place the pot in a cold greenhouse and mist cuttings regularly to prevent wilting. Plants should have rooted after six to eight weeks.

Ian Hodgson, editor-at-large

Expert Insight



Andy Stevens is head gardener of Borde Hill Garden, a 17-acre formal garden in West Sussex, which includes a Rose Garden, Italian Garden, and a glorious display of camellias, magnolias, rhododendrons and azaleas. Visit www.bordehill.co.uk for more. Here, he gives us some top tips.

5 Greater rooting success will be achieved by taking cutting material from vigorous, healthy plants in early autumn after leaf fall, or now, in late winter just before bud burst. Make sure material is disease free - particularly important with fruit - and that cutting tools are sharp and sterile.

6 If planting cuttings in pots in a frame or outside, use a gritty compost and make sure they do not dry out. If cuttings get too warm too soon, they will come into leaf before producing roots, and will die.



7 Cuttings can be grown outside in a sand-lined trench, ideally on a sheltered, well-drained, south-facing site - protection from wind helps prevent vulnerable new shoots from damage. Cuttings can be stored in bundles in pots of sand in a frame until early spring.

8 Cutting thickness is important - no more than 12mm (½in), even for vigorous growers such as poplar or willow. For varieties that generally produce thinner material, for example currants, use the thickest material, as very thin cuttings have low food reserves and could die before rooting.

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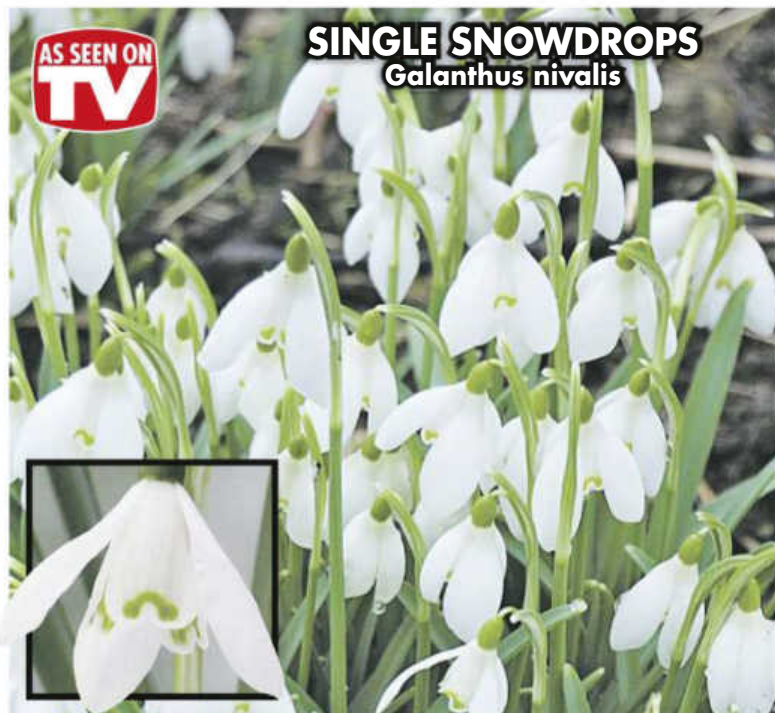
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